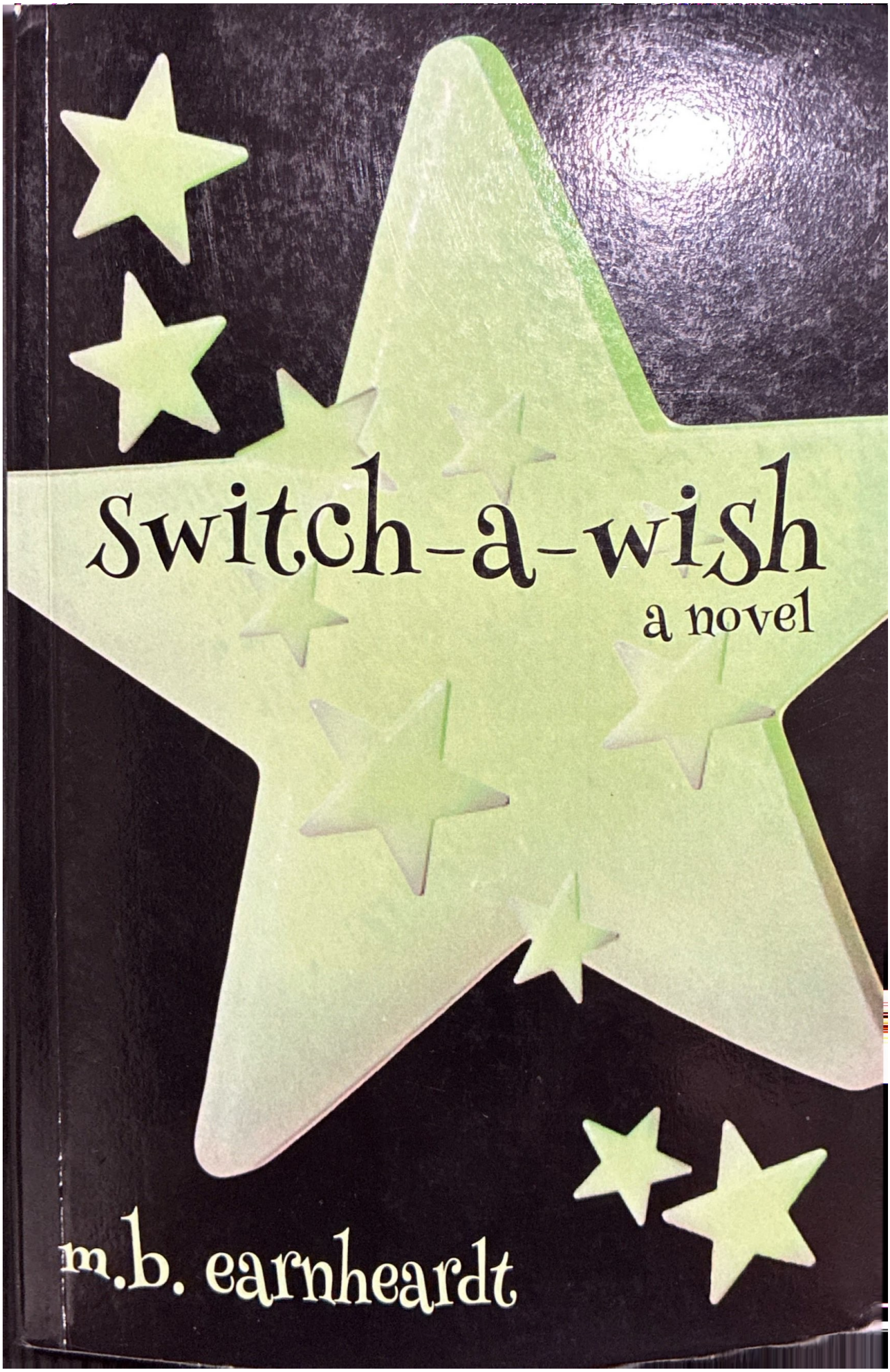
Switch-a-wish
a novel
m.b. earnheardt

Switch-A-Wish

M.B. Earnheardt

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Switch-A-Wish
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Dedication

For the most important men in my life... my dad, Jim and my husband, Adam.

Acknowledgements

If the true measure of success is connecting with people who support you and add to the quality of your life, then I am hugely successful. First and foremost, my husband Adam (who is not the inspiration for any character in this book) is my best friend, kindest critic, co-parent, partner-in-crime, cheerleader and emotional guidepost. After several early rejections, I gave up. But Adam never stopped believing that there was a home for the book.

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I have the best kids: Ella, Katie, Sadie and Ozzie. They fill my heart my heart with love, and make me a better human.

Chapter 1

Amanda

I wish Chris could understand how hard it is to be me.

There. The kids made their wish and now, I've made mine. It may not be mature for a grown woman to wish on a plastic star, but after this last fight, I don't even care. My wish is self-pitying and unproductive, but it's what I'm thinking. I don't even look at my husband while I find my place next to him.

My eyes close and I try to fantasize that he's already gone, moved out and living in a tiny apartment, sitting on a camp chair, and eating a fast food sandwich. It will be nice to have the bed and the house to myself after he's forced into his own place. The plans I have to hire a divorce lawyer this week, work through the soft tissue of my mind. My head is spinning with possibilities of starting over and it takes a while before I finally drift off to sleep.

The crying baby jars me from my dreams. Sammi's up and she's demanding breakfast. I'm happy she sleeps through the night, but I wish she'd sleep in a little longer in the morning. My body protests as I haul it from the bed, barely opening my eyes.

My sleep-deprived brain sends an alarm telling me I'm not on the right side of the bed. Instinctively, my legs make an adjustment and my feet find the floor on the other side. I reach out to find my glasses. It's too early for contacts, but I don't feel them in the usual spot. It's not the first time I've knocked them to the floor before bed and had to make do without the prescription to sharpen my vision. For some reason, things don't seem as fuzzy as usual. I don't have time to dwell on this, because the baby is really starting to freak out now and I need to get to her.

My body aches as I force it from the bed. I guess I slept on my shoulder wrong because it feels swollen and stiff. My mind hasn't fully moved from sleep to awareness. As my brain is pulled into the reality of the moment, I don't feel like myself. Other things are not quite right. The weight of my breasts is absent from my chest and it seems like I'm taking up more physical space than usual. What I do feel is a distinct lack of clothes...and I feel hair everywhere except my head...what is going on?

I'm suddenly hyperconscious, as if someone threw an icy drink in my face, and I run to the light switch and flick it on.

I hear my voice, say, "What the hell?" My body sits up (fully clothed in flannel pajamas, thank God) and squints at me. The baby is still crying.

Tears form in my eyes. I don't know what's going on, so, I turn to the full-length mirror behind the door. Chris's body is looking back at me. I lose it. The tears stream down his face. I look over at my body and I hear my words come out in Chris's voice, "What happened to me?"

My voice responds, "What are you talking about?" My throat is being cleared. "Amanda, where are you? What's wrong with my voice? Do you hear that?"

"I hear you," I respond in Chris's voice. "Something is terribly wrong."

The baby's cries are getting louder and my body aches to scoop her into my arms and smell her sweet skin. "I have to get Sammi," I cry over my shoulder as I run down the hall naked and burst into the nursery.

My baby is tight up against the bars of the crib and I reach down, grab Sammi and cradle her against the alien body. The arms I'm using are too big and unwieldy, but I clutch her to my bare chest anyway. The coos that usually soothe her are awkward and low pitched. She won't quiet to them. She wants her mommy and from her perspective, that's not me.

Her face is red and angry. My maternal instincts bear down on me. "It's okay, baby." Getting her calm is the only priority I have right now. I carry her over to the mini-fridge we keep in the nursery, grab a bottle, and take her back to my bedroom. She's out of breath which makes it difficult for her to latch onto the bottle.

When we get into the room she holds out her hands to my body, which is sitting on the side of the bed. She doesn't want to stay in these oversized, hairy arms. Rejection washes over me. I'm crying and naked and vulnerable and defeated. I hand Sammi and the bottle to my body.

Instinctually, whatever it is in my skin gives her the bottle and she begins to calm. My rational mind is telling me to keep her with me because I don't want to hand my baby over to this pod person, but somehow, I know she'll be all right. Reason dictates that if I want the other kids to keep sleeping while I figure this out, the baby needs to be calmed.

"I don't know what is going on." Even though I'm wailing, I lower my voice so the other kids won't hear me. "Who are you?"

"It's me. It's Chris," my voice says. "Who are you?"

"It's Amanda," I say in Chris's voice.

Saying my name suddenly makes me self-conscious. I look down and shudder at my husband's naked body. My eyes survey the room for something to cover myself with. They land on a pair of sweatpants crumpled in a heap on the bedroom floor. I grab them and get one leg in before I realize they don't fit. The mirror shows me my mistake and I'm able to adjust. I grab a pair of Chris's shorts from his drawer and they fit perfectly. Covering my naked skin makes me a tiny fraction more comfortable. It's not much comfort though, because it's finally starting to register with me that I'm in my husband's body.

"We...we... we switched bodies?" I ask, still crying, my disbelief making me stumble over the words. "This can't be happening. Th...th...this is not possible."

Chris, bouncing and cuddling the baby, is squinting at me. "I can't see."

My glasses are on the bedside table where I put them last night. I grab them and sit them on my nose. Chris makes my face fidget and then seems to be able to focus. He gets out of bed, still holding the baby. He reaches out to me, but I pull back. After what he said last night, his hands are not welcomed.

"Come on, Amanda, I know your mad, but you're going to have to put that aside right now. Something bizarre is happening to us." Maybe it's because the words sound so rational coming from my familiar face, or perhaps it's the desperation in his plea, whatever it is makes me take pause.

He uses this opportunity to grab my hand and walk me back over to the mirror. We stand together and look at the familiar couple staring back at us. I've seen this image of the two of us together a thousand times in a thousand different situations. The images flood my brain. A photo taken at a fraternity party formal, the two of us dressed in our best clothes. A photo from our first vacation as a couple, standing on the beach. Our wedding photo. We look like we belong together and seeing the familiar image comforts me—me, with the baby in my arms, long brown hair falling around my shoulders, him tall and masculine standing by my side—but I know that somehow things have gone terribly wrong and we're not ourselves. We're wearing each other's bodies.

"How did this happen?" I ask, wonder and fear filling the air. "This is not possible."

"I don't know how it happened," Chris responds. He takes the bottle out of Sammi's mouth and puts her over his/my shoulder for a burp. "But, I think you got the short end of the deal." A small, but charming smile creeps onto his face.

"How can you joke?" I pivot on my heel so we're face to face. I'm so scared it's hard for me to even talk. "This is supernatural."

"Sorry." His smile vanishes and is replaced with a pout. "I thought I'd try to make you feel better."

It seems strange, but this is what Chris always does. When things get too tense or frightening, he makes little jokes to make me smile. It's comforting to see him behave this way, even if he's doing it in my body.

"No, I'm sorry. I just..." I take a deep breath and try to calm myself. "I just...I mean...this can't be happening? Can it?" I turn back to the mirror and grab at his face. I pinch and pull at his cheeks, smack his forehead and stick my fingers into the sides of his mouth. It feels real.

"It can't." His voice is soft, but assured. "It absolutely cannot happen. But, it seems as though it has."

Chapter 2

Two Days Earlier
Chris

Someone is crawling into my bed. My mind is straddling the space between a sexy dream I can't quite remember and the reality that it's the middle of the night and my wife is in my bed and she's awake. The details of the dream are strange and inconsequential, as they have left behind an erection as evidence of their existence. Dreams like this are a normal part of the development of adolescent boys. I remember waking up both scared and delighted in those years when I first learned how to use the posters of pretty ladies that hung on my bedroom wall to help me fulfill my desires. I now have what I didn't then, a real, live girl lying next to me breathing quietly, albeit clad in a flannel cocoon.

Strategy is important. If I move too quickly, she'll feel threatened, and make an excuse to pull away. If I move too slowly, she'll

fall asleep, and if that happens, waking her is not an option. The tone and approach have to be spot on if I want to find my connection with her.

I start by turning to face her. Luck is on my side because when I finish rolling, her mouth is just inches from my own. If she were facing the other way, I may not have an opportunity. Fear that she's already asleep forces my hushed whisper, "You awake?"

"Barely." There is some defensiveness in her mumbled response, but this doesn't deter me. She could have pretended to be sleeping. Her admission to being awake is a sign she may be into this. I pull my hand from under the sheet and gently rest my fingers on her cheek. The soft glow from the nightlight shows her eyes looking at me. It's like I'm trying to catch a wild animal, but she's not wild at all, quite the opposite.

When she allows me to touch her face, my tongue flicks out to wet my lips then I lean in and kiss her, at first softly on the forehead. Her body tightens in resistance, but she doesn't pull away. I move my mouth to hers and feel the warmth of our lips coming together. Gently, I prod her mouth open with my tongue. We both have the same taste, a mixture of the lingering minty flavor of our teeth brushed just hours ago, and the slight tang of sleep. I'm excited when she kisses me back. There is tension in the way she moves, alerting me to some reluctance. I'm hoping to erase this, so I am gentle when I move my hand down to her thigh. She remains stiff, but doesn't pull away.

My body gently pushes against her so she can feel my erection on her leg. My fingers long to touch her breast, a move that she may find off-putting. Instead, I push my hand just under the waistband of her pajama bottoms. She takes the signal, reaches down, and slides her pants off.

This is really going to happen.

My head fills with ideas of what I can do to make her feel good. I want to use my hands and my mouth and work her into a frenzy of desire, but she already has her hand on my penis trying to put it inside of her. The voice in the back of my head tells me this is a sign that she's only doing this to make me happy. To her, it's perfunctory sex and she wants to speed up the process so she can go to sleep. It's not exactly what I had in mind, but I feel desperate to connect to her.

I try to make the best of it. My mouth moves to her neck and gently whispers her name, "Amanda." She doesn't respond, but I

feel the stiffness go out of her shoulders. Instead of keeping her head pulled slightly away so I have to lean into her for the kiss, she is now leaning into me. I position my body on top of her and take a risk by moving my hand under her shirt to play with her nipple. It pays off. She lets out a soft moan.

Then, it happens. At first it's barely a squeak. I whisper, "Oh baby," to try to mask the sounds. It seems to work for a split second, but then a door opens down the hallway. I try to keep going, but she asks me to stop, so I do. She pushes me off of her, sits up, and stiffens like a deer that has been startled by the intrusion of a human in the woods.

"Oh shit," she whispers, hopping out of the bed and immediately looking for her pajama bottoms. In a flash, she's dressed and sitting on the side of the bed waiting for our late night visitor. My wife looks over at me. In the glow of the night-light, her face looks apologetic, like she's upset at the intrusion, but in the next second, she realizes I'm naked and aroused and commands, "Cover yourself."

The sheet just settles over my erect penis before Mady, my three-year-old, makes her appearance at the doorway. Amanda says, "Come here," and Mady runs straight into her mother's arms.

"I had a bad dream after you left. Will you come back to my bed?" Mady's is the halting voice that comes from crying.

"Cock-blocker," I mumble.

Amanda turns her head toward me. It's too dark to make out her exact expression, but I can sense it's a reprimand.

"Sure baby. Let's go to your room." The two of them disappear down the hallway and I'm left with the craving of our unfinished intercourse.

The lotion and tissue box sit on my bedside table. It's going to be another night when I finish the job myself. Disappointment washes over me because I'm becoming desperate to reconnect with my wife. Tonight is not just the symptom of a broken sex life, it's indicative of our whole marriage. We're at a place where any closeness slips away too quickly only to be replaced by loneliness. Moments I try to steal in the middle of the night are accompanied by resentment.

These thoughts are leading to anger, so I try to head it off by willing my mind back into the dream. I focus on conjuring up a fantasy. It's not a model or actress I try to picture. Instead, I try to

produce an image of the Amanda I fell in love with—the girl in her early twenties who never pulled away from my touch. Back then she was a smart, cool girl who used to initiate sex. She'd tease me, and play with me, and make me feel like the only man in the world. When the two of us were together, every cell in my body felt adored.

When my eyes are closed and my mind is focused, I can almost see her. It's not quite coming together, so I try picturing the individual features. The long brown hair tucked behind her ear, bright eyes sparkling with mischief. I think about her smooth tanned skin and her firm breasts.

My mind works to bring the distinct pieces together, but it won't let me assemble them into my wife. I try a little longer and don't have any luck. I can almost make it happen, but it slips away right before it all connects. It's like that girl doesn't exist anymore, even in my memories.

There is a slight pang of guilt when another woman's image fills my head. A younger woman I know now. I know she would kiss me with passion and never show resistance to my touches. This woman reminds me of Amanda and I decide that will have to be good enough. Resistance fades and my imagination takes flight as I lose myself in the fantasy.

When I'm done masturbating, the afterglow is marred with shame. The woman I am picturing is not a dream like the poster girls from my youth. She's real and I know she's willing to live out my fantasies with me. In the cool, dark room after a failed attempt at sex with my wife I let the notion fill my head. I didn't believe myself to be the kind of guy who could cheat on his wife, but after thirteen years together, three kids, and a whole lot of resentment, I'm finding out that I may be that guy after all.

Chapter 3

Amanda

The steady hiss of the shower alerts me that Chris is out of bed. It's early morning and I'm a little surprised he's already awake. Maybe the screaming kids did it. The idea of him losing even a few minutes of sleep because he can't ignore all the early morning chaos makes me smile a little. Besides, I've already been awake for nearly two hours.

I go into the bathroom and poke my head through the frosted shower door to say good morning.

"Why don't you come in and join me?" He flashes me a sly smile, the steam from the hot water making the comment even more suggestive.

I slide the door closed and mentally abuse myself for approaching my husband with a quick question while he's naked, especially after the way things ended last night. This is a rookie mistake, and I really should know better.

It's only a little after seven o'clock and I already feel the weight of his proposition—promise to have sex or make my husband feel rejected again. Leaving him midway through foreplay to take care of Mady would make it two rejections in the last six-hours.

Why does he always put me on the spot like this? What does he expect me to do, let the kids run wild through the house while I rip off my clothes, and join him in the shower? He has no idea how much work goes into taking care of these kids, or he wouldn't think I could just stop everything for a morning quickie.

I'm still tired and I've already had two cups of coffee. "No way." I raise my voice over the noise of the shower. A towel on the floor is bothering me, so I reach down and grab it.

"I thought we could pick up where we left off last night." He's still acting playful, but I know there is a slight threat in this comment.

"I just threw away the tissues you left on the floor beside the bed. From the looks of things, you did a fine job of finishing by yourself." I arrange the towel on the bar next to the bathtub as I speak, adjusting it and running a smoothing hand over the terry-cloth while I wait for whatever whiny reply he is preparing.

"Sorry, but that's no replacement for having sex with my wife." The petulance in his tone makes him sound like a spoiled teenage boy.

The steam from the shower hides my eye roll as I ignore his comment and quick-change the subject. "I just wanted to check to see if you were going to be home in time to take Emma and Mady to dance or if I had to do it."

He turns the water off and slides the door open. "Yeah, I'll be home in time to take them to class." He grabs a towel and brings it up to his face. "Maybe we can get them to bed early tonight and then we can go to bed early, too." He looks at me with his I-am-not-paying-the-slightest-bit-of-attention-to-the-fact-you-are-trying-to-ignore-my-seduction-and-get-this-circus-moving smile. "What do you think?"

He drops the towel to the floor and turns his body square with mine. He stands there naked, partially erect, and dripping. Why does he always have to look so hopeful? In my rational brain, I know he looks sexy. At this moment, I can't see it. It's not that he looks repulsive, just invisible. My mind is spinning with a long list of responsibilities and these make me incapable of seeing Chris the way he's asking to be seen.

Chris is *always* thinking about sex. I am *rarely* thinking about sex. My mental calendar shows that, in addition to our attempt last night, we just had sex Friday night. I remember the specifics because I had to stop watching a good episode of *Makeover, USA* and this annoyed me slightly because I hate to skip the big reveal at the end of the episode. I remind him of this and he doesn't seem to appreciate my response.

"You know, we can do it more than once a week." His sigh indicates he's losing patience with me. "When we were first married we used to do it almost every day. Sometimes twice a day."

That was a long time ago. "Things are different now. We live in a zoo and I'm the zookeeper." I change the subject. "I gotta go wake Emma. I just wanted to say hi and ask you about dance class." And with that I'm gone.

He thinks I track our sex life to make sure we *only* do it once a week. This is inaccurate. I track our sex life to make sure I remember to do it at *least* once a week.

Don't get me wrong, I like sex. In fact, I miss the girl I used to be—the one who didn't put sex on a to-do list to check off each week—but at this point in my life, I just don't have the time or energy to be that girl anymore. If something is going to get done, I have to put it on the list with everything else. Pay the electric bill, send a thank you card to my mother, buy Emma a new leotard, have sex with Chris, take out the garbage...it's the only way to keep our lives from falling apart.

My motivation for having sex these days is to keep Chris happy, not to have orgasms. Chris is good at sex. That is one of the reasons I wanted to marry him. I know people would argue that, because Chris is the only man I've slept with, I can't be sure, but I don't see why I need to have my sex life judged in front of a phantom jury of past lovers to know it's good.

From our first time together, he's been generous and fun in bed. I don't have to build up a long list of other men to know I enjoy the way Chris makes me feel. But, anymore, I just don't feel like a girl who has sex.

Being a mom consumes me, and feeling like a mom isn't all that sexy. Every time I let myself go and enjoy the experience my mind finds its way back to that to-do list, or to a problem at the kids' school, or something equally as unsexy. Things should get better once the girls are older and more independent, but right

now I'm just trying to keep him happy enough so we don't fight. I'm pretty sure I'm failing miserably at this and I'm getting increasingly annoyed that he doesn't appreciate the sex we do have.

Anyway, there's a way for him to make sure we have sex more regularly. He can work with me to try to get pregnant again.

Lately, I've been more and more sure that if Chris and I are going to stay together, then we need to have another baby. We've been fighting a lot and having a baby always brings us closer. He can't pull away from me when our DNA is combined in my body's incubator. When this is happening, my husband has to be there for me and he has to indulge my requests. It's selfish to think about putting this kind of responsibility on a tiny baby, but I need to make a move that will bring Chris's attention back to our family. The dynamic of our relationship has changed recently and he's pulling away from me.

Chris practically rips my head off when I mention the idea of a fourth child. The list of excuses he presents is endless...we already don't spend enough time alone together...the house is too small...we don't have enough money. He has valid points, but I remember how attentive and loving he is at the hospital and in the early days. He even takes paternal leave to help with the kids.

I leave the bathroom and head into my bedroom. Our youngest daughter, Sammi, is positioned in the middle of the bed where I left her, busily sucking on the edge of her blanket. She's only eight months old and I can already tell that she's going to be a happy kid. I grab wipes and a diaper from a shelf next to the door and change her.

When this is finished, I throw the wet diaper on Chris's side of the bed. This makes me feel good. I know it's passive aggressive, but it's my way of getting back at him for making me feel pressure to have sex. After all, it's not just the big arguments and fights that help me release my frustrations, it's also all the little "fuck you's" I work into his day.

Sammi and I head into Emma's room and wake her. She's my angel. She'll be six soon and she just started kindergarten. She makes me feel like I've accomplished something. She can walk... and talk...and use the bathroom...and climb stairs...and dress herself (kind of)...and she's even beginning to read. It gives me hope that one day, everybody will be able to pitch in, and work together to make this family function, and take some pressure off me.

"Good morning, Mama." Emma stretches her arms above her head. Her short brown hair is matted a bit in the back from sleep and her brown eyes still look deliciously drowsy.

"Good morning, angel face." An early morning, just-for-Emma smile comes to my lips. I take her hand and pull her out of bed. "How'd you sleep?"

"Good." She gives me a lazy smile and wraps her arms around my legs for a hug. "I dreamed about bears—not bad bears that try to eat you, nice bears."

"What did the bears do?" I ask.

"Acted like nice bears." A yawn escapes. "You know… tea parties… dress up."

Of course. I smile again and grab her hand. The three of us head downstairs.

The smell of coffee and eggs fill the air as I pull together breakfast for Emma and Mady. I'm getting back on track and it looks like I'll be able to get Emma ready for school in time for her to catch the bus. It makes my morning much easier if I don't have to load all three of them into the minivan and drive to the school.

The four of us are settled at the table engaging in the silly chit-chat that little kids love when Chris comes into the kitchen. I may not like him much anymore, but I still love to see him dressed for work. It's always safer for me to admire his appearance when he's fully clothed.

He's six foot five and very masculine. He has broad shoulders and the muscular build of a guy who has played basketball since he was very young. His hazel eyes are cheerful and his crooked smile makes him look mildly amused and approachable.

Today, he's wearing a charcoal gray suit, that appears almost black, and a red tie. He doesn't dress like this every day. In fact, most days it's just a button-down and khakis. But today, his boss, Sally Rupert, is going to observe him teaching, so he stepped it up and he looks handsome. I know I should tell him I think he looks good, but I'm worried he'll pressure me for sex if I give an opening, so I keep that information to myself.

He smiles at me. I smile back.

"I made coffee."

The tension isn't quite gone, but it's in the background, at least for now. We always get along much better in front of the children.

He grabs the pot and pours some into the "World's Best Dad" mug Emma gave him last Christmas, then sits down, and starts teasing the girls. "Hey, Emma," he says. "What sound does the sad cow make?" It's a question from a book he reads to them almost every day.

Emma doesn't miss a beat. "A blue moo." Then she makes up her own question. "Hey, Daddy, what does the happy daddy say?"

"I don't know, what does he say?" Chris responds, feigning curiosity at a silly riddle he's heard too many times to count.

"I love MadyEmmaSammi!" Delighted giggles fill the air.

"Hey, Daddy," Mady chimes in, "what does the happy daddy say?" She loves to imitate her big sister.

"I don't know, Mads, what does he say?" Chris shows endless patience with the older girls—patience that he never seems to have for me.

"I have a stinky butt." Mady squeals with delight. Emma offers laughter as encouragement. They love to talk about stinky butts, farts, burps, boogers all the gross stuff, especially when we're eating.

They go on like this while I make breakfast for Chris. He eats and volunteers to take Emma to the bus stop. I'm happy for the assistance, even though it's clear to me he's only helping because he's trying to make sure I'm in a good mood so we can have sex tonight. He read some research study that said men who help their wives with chores get more sex. This is a particularly good research study.

I take Emma to her room and help her pick out a pair of leggings and a yellow and violet striped dress. She looks just like one of the kids on the posters in front of the children's department at the store. She's always been easy and agreeable. After she's dressed, we go downstairs and I shuffle the two little kids back into the family room for some playtime. Mady is power hungry, and being in charge of the baby, even for a few minutes, feeds this craving.

While they are busy with blocks, I head to the foyer, and give Emma a kiss on the cheek. Chris has just helped her put on her jacket. "Have a good day," I say. Then I give Chris a routine kiss. I try to make it quick, but he grabs me and pushes his mouth hard against mine. My attempts to wiggle free don't work—he's just

too strong. "Oh my God, Chris, I haven't even brushed my teeth yet. I'm gross."

"I don't care. I'll take whatever I can get," He pats me on the ass and heads out the door.

Chapter 4

Chris

Emma hops into the car and buckles herself into the front seat. When we leave the driveway, she has to sit in the back strapped into a booster seat, but when I drive her to the end of the driveway to catch the bus, I let her sit up front with me. We're a little early, but I don't mind because Emma and I like to play tic-tac-toe while we wait. The time I get to spend alone with any of my kids is precious to me. I'm so busy, I feel like I barely know Sammi. Even when I am home, I mostly play with Emma and Mady and let Amanda handle the baby.

I feel guilty, but it's unavoidable. Things have picked up at work and I'm trying to set myself up to be department chair next year. The position is administrative and it would mean more money. Our current chair, Sally, decided to go back to the faculty and concentrate on research and teaching. So, I have a real shot at this.

In order to get the job, I have to be elected by the faculty and to do this, I have to impress everyone. Lately, I've been questioning whether it's worth it to put so much time into my work, but I know Amanda wants to have another baby and I feel pressure to make more money. Hell, even if we don't have another baby, the idea of providing for the girls I already have makes me break into a cold sweat. Besides, I really love my job.

"I beat you," Emma says. She did beat me, but only because I let her. Amanda gets upset when I do this. She believes that if we want the girls to grow up to be strong adults, then we shouldn't let them win because they need to learn to be good losers. I don't want them to feel like losers. Besides Amanda's not here right now, so I get to make my own decisions about my kids.

The bus pulls up. Emma gives me a kiss and hops out of the car. She climbs onto the bus and when she gets to the top step she turns back and waves. *I love that kid.*

I wave back as the doors close. After the bus pulls away, I tune the radio to my favorite sports talk show and head to work. The chatter of the hosts fills the car. My thoughts get lost while I listen to the current sports headlines, scores, and opinions. It feels good to let my brain focus on this stuff. Sports talk provides the background noise that accompanies my daily transition from knucklehead husband to brilliant scholar.

Campus is only five miles from our house, so I don't have a long commute. My favorite way to enter campus is through the Wick Avenue gateway. Wick Avenue is the home to the Youngstown Arts Community. The architecture is grand and eclectic and the street is always buzzing with students carrying art supplies and musical instruments. I pull into the parking lot closest to my office and begin the short walk to Becker Hall.

The campus grounds are perfectly manicured this time of year. The autumn leaves are just starting to change and the air is still warm. It's early October and we're not quite to the midpoint of the fall semester. This time of year makes it feel like everything is still ahead of me. Homecoming...midterms...the holiday break...it's all in my future and full of possibilities.

My reflection in the glass doors catches my eye as I enter the building. *Not bad.* Seeing myself in a suit reminds me that I have to step it up today. But, before I can do that, I need to get a few things for my eleven o'clock class and I really have to check my

email. Walking down the hallway, I run into my buddy Charlie Long. His office is just down the hall from mine.

"Hey man, what's up?" Charlie asks.

"Not much, bro. Are you ready for a little Monday night action? Gotta love the Steelers, especially when they're crushing the Browns." Charlie is a lifelong fan of the Cleveland Browns and it irritates the hell out of him that I live in Ohio and still root for my hometown Pittsburgh Steelers. This is how guys show affection. We try to irritate each other.

"Did you know that the Browns have the largest international following of any team in the NFL?" Charlie asks, trying to annoy me. This has been part of our routine for years now.

Charlie started right before I did and I still remember the way he ribbed me while I was on campus interviewing for the job. We had an instant connection and he's the closest thing I have to a best friend.

"Did you know none of that matters to a team that has actually won Super Bowls?" I reply with a grin. "You got plans for lunch?"

"Yeah, I'm going to eat at my desk and work on some data analysis for my soap opera study. How about tomorrow?" Charlie's research focuses on the impact of soap operas on American culture. It's always seemed kind of strange to me, but he's really made a career of it.

Charlie is a tall, good-looking, black man. He's never been married and he changes girlfriends, at least, once a month. He reminds me of myself before I settled down with Amanda and to be honest, lately, I've been kind of jealous of Charlie and all the freedom he has.

"Sounds good, man. We're on for lunch tomorrow. I'll catch you later?" I open the door and take a step into my office.

"Sure thing, bro." He disappears further down the hallway.

My computer comes to life and I settle into my desk. While I'm opening an email, my phone rings.

"Hey." It's Amanda.

"Hey." I let out an audible sigh. Instantly, I'm annoyed that she's bothering me at work. I don't like to think about home when I'm here.

"I need to go to the store today and pick up some things for Sammi."

Here we go. Time to spend all of our discretionary money for the next two weeks.

"She's getting really big and her clothes don't fit anymore."

"Okay."

Amanda prattles on while I look at my email message. "I want to move her up a size from six-month clothes into nine months and we don't have warm baby outfits at that size. I thought I'd get some long sleeve onesies, a few pairs of pants, new pajamas, tights, a dress or two, you know, just the basics."

One more click and I've finished this email. I turn my attention back to Amanda. What Amanda is proposing sounds like the basics for a pop star getting ready to go on tour, not for an eight-month-old baby with a very limited social calendar. Why do we need all this stuff for her to sit at home, eat baby food, and play with her sisters? Who cares if her clothes are too small? I know I can't say this to Amanda. She'll freak. So instead, I say, "Yeah, okay. How much do you think you'll spend?"

"I don't know. I'll go to the outlets and try to get everything on sale. They have good sales. I'll get good prices."

"Put it on the bank card. It'll be okay. Just don't spend very much. Things are a little tight this month." I click out of my email window.

"Well, your daughter doesn't care how tight our budget is. Do you want it to look like we can't afford to buy our kid clothes that fit her?" *She's pissed.* "You know, Chris, she's your kid, too. It's not for me. I don't spend any money on myself."

She always gets pissed when I say we need to watch the money. My wife's also a liar. She does spend money on herself. Not too much, but some. I make a decision not to engage in a fight before my class. Sometimes when we fight, I get really upset and it ruins my whole day.

"Sorry, babe. Get what you need." A resigned sigh escapes from the line of my tight lips. "We'll make it work. I gotta go. Have fun."

"I will. Bye."

She hangs up before I can return the goodbye. Why does she even ask me if she can go? I wish she'd just do it. It's not like what I say really matters. Every time we have a conversation like this I feel like a failure. Nothing would make me happier than being able to tell my wife to go and buy whatever she needs and still be able to pay the bills, but we can't afford that.

The thing that pisses me off the most is that she wants to spend money, but she hates it when I work. No matter what I do, I can't make her happy. I'm trying like hell to get elected chair because I know we'll have more money, but she doesn't support the extra things I have to do to get this job. It's frustrating. She can be such a bitch about work.

Lately, I've been thinking that we should see a marriage counselor. We've been fighting too much, and I feel like we're not talking to each other, and we're definitely not having sex. All these problems make me want to disconnect from Amanda. She would be angry if she knew I was thinking about this, so, instead of confronting these issues, I end up walking on eggshells all the time. This is why work is relaxing for me. People here appreciate me. My students love me even if my wife thinks I'm a jerk.

I try to shake off the phone call and get back to my email. The argument still bothers me as I get my stuff together and head to the classroom. Today, Sally will be in my class to evaluate my teaching. I spent a lot of time working on this lesson plan and I know it should be great. It has to be great if I want to be chair. Everything has to be perfect.

There's only one problem, I'll be distracted because I made my wife feel bad. At least I'm starting to get used to it.

Chapter 5

Amanda

Chris has a gift for making me feel like a complete loser. I hate talking about money. We're not poor. We have lots of nice things (most of which Chris bought without even asking me), but if I need to buy some clothes for our baby, he makes me feel like I have to beg. There is no paycheck with my name on it and this frustrates me because I still feel like I should be able to buy what we need. Even though I don't want to have a job because it would mean giving up this time with my kids, I still miss bringing in a salary. I miss feeling independent.

Taking care of a family is not easy and I work really hard to make everyone happy. Money has been the topic of many discussions in our family, but Chris and I can't make any headway. We're both too frustrated. There is a whole cache of saved search results for local marriage counselors on my computer. I've also

read more than a dozen articles that give advice for talking about money problems (and sex... and parenting...).

When it comes time to confront Chris about these things, I can't seem to follow through. I'm too chicken because I'm worried he'll have a fit. His dad suffered from mental illness and I don't think he'd like any suggestion that he may need to see a therapist, even as part of a couple working through marital problems. The dream is one day we'll sit down and really talk to each other, like we used to. This, and the distraction of my kids, is what keep me going.

Instead of continuing to dwell on the conversation, I turn my attention to something a bit more productive. The breakfast table is littered with dirty dishes and half eaten food. I try to pick up a plate, but it's stuck to the red, vinyl tablecloth.

When it finally comes loose, I smell the ranch dressing.

Everything in my life smells like ranch dressing. The car. The couch. My clothes. Most of the time it's not overwhelming, just a whiff that I get no matter where I am or what I'm doing. I'm not sure how people got their kids to eat anything before they had ranch dressing. My kids put it in yogurt, on eggs, toast and fruit. They love it. I, on the other hand, throw up a little in my mouth if I even get a small taste of it. It used to be a regular part of my diet, but they've ruined it for me.

The plate comes loose from the ranch dressing glue and I take it to the kitchen and load the dishwasher. Even though I want to push the resentment I feel toward Chris out of my mind, it feels like the more I try to do this, the more permanent it becomes.

When Chris and I first got married, I thought life would be romantic and fun. I thought I'd be a tidy mother with perfectly groomed kids and a loving husband. Everything would turn out just like the images of families you see on television. It's funny how these images don't include the throw-up and the messy house and the distant husband who is always at work.

A thought tries to break into my consciousness. Would I have married Chris if I knew my life would be so disappointing? I push the thought out of the way, but not before I get a brief glimpse of my answer...*No*.

I try to refocus on our early days. The first few years, when it was just Chris and me, our relationship was kind of perfect. When we first got married, I was a reporter for a small town newspaper

and he was in graduate school finishing a Ph.D. We both worked long hours, but when we were together, we were completely connected.

There were many long nights when he'd sit at his old desktop computer in the spare bedroom with articles and books scattered all around him and I'd lay on the bed with our laptop and we'd both work in the same room. Chris would interrupt me to tell me a joke, I'd jump onto his lap, and we'd push our work to the side, and have sex. Our pillow talk consisted of research projects, teaching, and the stories I worked on for the paper. We connected as adults and friends.

We now live in the suburbs and he works as a professor at North Ohio University. Most people think this is an easy job because he teaches four classes a semester and has the option of not teaching in the summer. What you find out when you are involved in this lifestyle is it's not easy. Instead, it's a job that has no boundaries. My husband is a full-blown workaholic. He is driven, ambitious, and thrives on validation in his career. He doesn't think twice about canceling plans with the girls or me if his boss calls and wants him to show up on campus. I'm not sure if he does this to escape or if he does this because he loves it. Either way, it irritates me.

The last few weeks, the tension between the two of us has been more severe. What has changed? I don't know. I just know he's pulled away. While I'm kind of worried, there is some precedent. I sensed we were losing him right before I got pregnant with Sammi. Of course, when we had the baby, he had to refocus on home again.

My days are spent moving between a desperate desire to keep him and an almost equally strong desire to call it quits and move on. Spending time with someone who is on his cell phone so much of the time, either texting while we're hanging out, or making calls after we're all in bed, is getting old.

Even though there has been a buildup to get us to this level, my first realization that something was terribly wrong came when I began to feel relieved when he would leave to take a call because it meant his attention was not on me. It's almost easier for me to keep all our lives running smoothly if he's distracted and not insisting on being part of the decision making process. His recent distraction has left me with freedom to act without his blessing. I

realize that this is not the way a family should act. However, I'm not sure what I want to do. I just know I need to come up with a plan and do something.

It just so happens my best friend Roxy lives across the street. She'll be able to help.

Roxy Ramirez is my neighbor and she is glorious. She's the type of person who belongs on television. In fact, she was on television. She had a brief stint on the reality dating show, *Lucky Lady*.

When she was on the show, the "stud" was a slimy fellow by the name of Teddy Bancroft. I remember watching the finale episode right after we found out I was pregnant with Emma. I watch every season, well, except for Mark's season, he was just too dull for words.

Teddy was introduced to the viewing audience as a real catch. He was a six foot two inch entrepreneur from Austin, Texas. The commercials for this season promised a handsome blond with a "super-sweet" personality. Like most of the previous studs, Teddy only got the gig after he made it to the finals on Chastity's season of the sister show, *Stud Finder*. She passed him up for a flight instructor who was five years her junior.

Roxy was an early audience favorite on the blogs and discussion groups. I remember watching her and thinking she was too good for Teddy. A single mom from San Jose, Roxy was looking for a partner and a father figure for her young son. She was the tall, dark haired beauty who spoke with a sexy Latin accent. Her parents immigrated to New Mexico when she was a teenager. Even though she speaks perfect English, and has lived in the U.S. most of her life, her voice carries traces of her youth. She doesn't want to lose the accent because it adds to her charm and sometimes she uses it as an excuse to say mean things to people to their faces. She just pretends she doesn't know the word in English. This is just one of the many reasons I love Roxy.

Her first husband died in a car accident when she was just twenty-six years old. It was the quintessential, tragic, made for television backstory. Roxy was so cool she did what so many women would have done if they had the chance. She dumped Teddy on national television by rejecting his box of chocolates during the third show right after she had her first solo date with him. He literally begged her to stay. He even broke with *Lucky Lady* protocol and told her that if she stayed, he'd propose to her

at the end. She left anyway and Teddy ended up with a pretty and nice, but entirely uninteresting, mortgage broker. They announced their split five months after the engagement.

In the reunion special, Roxy confessed that she just wasn't that into Teddy and that she didn't want to waste her time going on dates with him and pretending it was okay to let him paw at her. She wanted to go home to her son, Joaquin, and she was happy being single for now. She was ambivalent about the fact that leaving early would ensure that she wasn't featured on the next season of *Stud Finder*. Roxy just did what she wanted to do.

When she bought the house across the street, I was completely star struck. Chris didn't even know who she was until I told him. He can be so clueless. I was a new mom, so this event was huge for me. I got dressed up in clothes I used to wear before I quit my job. They were a little tight, but I found that if I didn't button the top of my pants I could squeeze into them.

Even though I couldn't appreciate it at the time, I had it made when it was just me and baby Emma. She had lots of nice outfits and I found a very cute pink romper and matching hat that was perfect. I wasn't sure how to introduce myself, so I decided to take my new semi-famous neighbor a basket of muffins. Being new to the stay-at-home mom way of life, I'd never done any welcome-waggoning before, but I'd seen it done on television shows, so I thought I could handle it. The situation was perfectly engineered to meet Roxy.

When I got to the door and rang the bell, I was nervous. Roxy opened the door and I stuck my hand out to say "hi" and introduce myself, but I didn't get the chance. Baby Emma immediately spewed vomit on Roxy's designer clothes and then into the basket of muffins. To this day, I'm still not sure how such a tiny person was able to produce so much vomit. I was mortified. Roxy was not. She laughed while she pulled me into her home. We went to the kitchen and in no time, she had all the damage fixed. She told me that Joaquin was a puker, too.

After that, the friendship came easily. Roxy is kind and competent and fearless in her willingness to be herself. When I talk to her I instantly feel like a human being, even when my kids are there.

Roxy is still single, but she has more than her fair share of dates. When she's out, Joaquin, who is twelve now, will come over to our house, or I'll just be "on-call" in case he needs a little

help. Most of the time, he comes over and plays with the little girls. They adore him, and like his fabulous mother, Joaquin appreciates it when people adore him.

Roxy answers the phone on the third ring and I let her know I'm on my way. She's a real estate agent and works from home most of the time. This makes it convenient for me, seeing as I need regular life-coaching sessions. I pick up the baby and grab Mady's yogurt-covered hand and head across the street. The girls aren't even dressed yet. That will have to wait.

I find Roxy tidying her kitchen. Her home is beautiful and always clean. I should be jealous. Instead, I'm just in awe of her ability to keep her shit together.

"Ah, Mandy," she says as I walk into her kitchen. This is another one of Roxy's quirks. If you use your full name she shortens it, but if you use a nickname, she calls you by your full name. "What crisis do we have today?" *Should I be worried that she thinks I have a daily crisis? Do I have a daily crisis?* "Is Christopher being a complete A-S-S-H-O-L-E?" Roxy and I spell all our profanities when we're around children. We tried not using profanity, but didn't have much luck.

"Not completely." I settle the girls in the family room that is attached to the kitchen and turn the television to a kid's channel. Roxy and I have done this many times. My girls know the drill.

I take a seat at the kitchen island. "It's just the usual S-H-I-T. He's controlling with the money...and he works too much...and he doesn't spend enough time with us...and he wants to have sex all the time, even if I don't...and he doesn't want to have another baby...and I hate his mother...you know, the usual."

"Yes, I do. But he's a good husband for the most part, right? He doesn't cheat on you, he makes enough money. He's nice to the kids." She rattles off Chris's good qualities while she wipes an imaginary spill from the perfect countertop.

"Right, but I just can't help but wonder if being a nice guy makes up for the fact he's never really there for me. And I'm sure it doesn't make up for the fact I'm unhappy."

"What do you mean?" Roxy hangs up the dishtowel, grabs her coffee and sits down next to me. I've been complaining about Chris a lot lately and I know Roxy is starting to get worried. She likes the fact that Chris and I are married.

"I mean, this isn't how I thought my life would work out. I love the kids and I love having a family. I'm just not really sure

if I love him anymore. You know, like, LOVE-LOVE him." I over-exaggerate the words just like a teenager would. "I resent him for all the stuff he does and doesn't do."

"You don't LOVE-LOVE him? Shit, I mean S-H-I-T, that's bad." A frown mars her perfect features.

"Yeah, I guess this just isn't how I thought being married would be. I feel like I'm his subordinate, like I take care of all the things he doesn't want to do, while he goes out into the world, and lives a fabulous life."

"How did you think it would be?"

"I thought it would be like it was when we were first together. I literally couldn't get enough of him." It's true. Chris and I used to have amazing chemistry. We were always together and we were best friends and partners in everything. "We had sex all the time and everywhere."

"Well, that sounds good. Do that." She lifts her hands triumphantly, as if she's landed on the answer to all my problems.

"It's not that easy, Roxy. I don't feel like doing that anymore. Back then, we went out and did cool things and, most importantly, we had fun. I can't even remember the last time we had fun together. It's too much work and he's no fun to be around. I'm alone with the kids most of the time. Even when he's in the same room as the rest of us, he's on the laptop or texting."

"I know." She nods her head in agreement. "He was texting the whole time I was at your house the other day. I don't know what's so important he can't pay attention to company." Roxy finds it hard to believe that anyone would rather look at a cell phone than have a conversation with her.

"It's his job. He's become consumed with his job and he's turned me into a frumpy, bored housewife. We're a horrible cliché." I let my head drop to the countertop to emphasize my distaste at being so terribly dull.

"You are not frumpy." She defensively pats the back of my head to show her support. "You are beautiful and fun."

I reluctantly lift my chin up and look at her. "I am frumpy." I love Roxy and she's always been accepting of me, but it's not possible for this woman, who is perfect even in the ways that she's imperfect, to understand the disappointment of my life. I appreciate the support, but I know what I've become. "Look, here's the truth, I think it would be easier to raise kids with him if I didn't have to try to make our marriage work, too. Because we're mar-

ried, I have the expectation that he's supposed to be my partner and he's supposed to be there to help me with the kids. I have to run decisions by him and I have to live with his rules. If we got divorced, then I could stop resenting him for working all the time and being a lousy co-parent. It would go a long way to lessening my dislike of him."

"It sounds like you should talk to him. Does he know that you feel this way?"

"He has to know something is wrong, but no, I've never really told him how I feel."

"Does he understand that you are thinking about getting a divorce?"

"No." A small shudder runs through my body at the idea of talking to Chris about a divorce. "Every time I try to talk to him about it, we end up fighting. That's part of the problem. He thinks I'm the enemy and I don't feel like trying anymore. I think our relationship may be too far gone to fix. We're not best friends like we used to be. I'm not sure we're friends at all. And we can't connect. Even when we have sex, it feels like work, and I don't enjoy it anymore. I don't know what I want, but I know it's not this."

"I'm sorry." Roxy pats my hand. She's a few years older than me and because of the pain she experienced when her husband died, she's much wiser. She always knows how to comfort me. "I still think you need to talk to him. Just get it out there and tell him everything you've told me. Maybe you can go for counseling?"

"I don't know about the counseling. I'm not sure he'll go for it. I do, however, know that you're right. I need to talk to him."

"Yes, and soon."

"I'll try to get some time alone with him this weekend."

"Good girl. Now, let me tell you about Michael." And with that she tells me about this guy who is using her as his realtor to help him buy a house without his overprotective mother knowing. In no time, I'm laughing, cracking jokes and having fun. I just wish it was this easy with Chris.

Chapter 6

Chris

I'm in my office grading papers. Grading is awful. It's my least favorite part of an otherwise fabulous job. When I'm in the classroom with my students, I feel like I'm a rock star. Being a teacher is a good fit for me because I'm funny and interesting and really smart. My passion for the subject spills out of me and it always draws the students in. I almost always have perfect attendance in my classes and at registration time, they fill up quickly. There are even a handful of students who take classes they don't need just because I'm teaching them.

Being at home with Amanda may make me feel inadequate, but when I'm here I know I'm appreciated. I love my students. I revel in all their accomplishments. In fact, that's the reason I don't really like to grade. I don't like to be critical of them. It's not in my nature. I like to think of myself as a really nice guy.

A knock at my door is a welcome distraction. My stomach hits the floor when I see who it is—Jenna Clarke.

"Hi, Jenna." I motion her into my office. I'm not sure I want to let her in, but she's one of my students and I'm in office hours, so I kind of have to. We've been flirting a lot lately and I don't know if I can trust myself to be alone with her. These feelings are compounded after last night. Jenna was the girl I thought about after Amanda left. I feel guilty about this. However, I also feel exhilarated. After fantasizing about Jenna, it's exciting to have her stop in.

There is something about Jenna that reminds me of the early days with Amanda and that turns me on. Amanda and I met in college. I saw her at a party on campus and immediately knew I needed to meet her. She was my type, a brown-eyed brunette with a big personality and a great ass.

I was at the party with Pam, the girl I was dating at the time, but it didn't matter. When I saw Amanda push a strand of her hair behind her ear while laughing at a joke, I knew things were over with Pam. Amanda's friend Lauren was in my biology class and I got her to make the introduction. Amanda was nice to me, but when I complimented her she barely reacted. In fact, she left the party soon after she met me and I didn't even manage to get her phone number.

This just made me more determined. During the next few weeks, I managed to figure out most of Amanda's schedule. Stalking was not part of my usual routine when I met a new girl, but I just couldn't shake the attraction I felt for Amanda. The less interest she showed in me, the more I knew I wanted to be with her. Our relationship started off slowly. We were only acquaintances for that whole semester, but in the spring, I took a news reporting class (that I didn't even have to take) and we finally spent some real time together.

Amanda didn't want a boyfriend. She wanted to graduate and find a job that would eventually lead to a position in the Washington Press Corps. She could have done it, too. She was the smartest, funniest, and most honest person I had ever met.

When it came time for me to graduate, a semester before she was done, I enrolled in graduate school, just so I wouldn't have to leave her. I'm not sure exactly what made me want to finally settle down with her. It could have been that I was just sick of jumping from one girl to the next. I was a playboy in college, partly

because I wasn't all that picky, and partly because I know how to be charming and charismatic around women. Lately, the old playboy has been reemerging and I've been much more flirtatious and looking for female validation.

It is because of this, Jenna is in my office right now.

"Wow," she says approvingly. "Dr. C. you look hot." She looks at me like she's starving and I'm a big, juicy hamburger.

"Uh... thank you, Jenna." I enjoy the compliment, but know it is entirely inappropriate for her to refer to me as hot.

She walks over to me and touches my tie. "I love this. Where'd you get it?" She practically purrs when she asks the question.

"I don't remember." My voice cracks during the weak response. This girl unnerves me.

I first met Jenna when I had her in a gender communication class. She was funny and outgoing and really, very attractive. I know I'm a good teacher, but it takes good students to bring this out in the classroom and Jenna was one of those students. She always did the readings and she spoke out in class.

Because the course was about gender communication, we talked a lot about our relationships with the opposite sex. I would often tell stories about miscommunicating with Amanda that didn't always portray my wife in the most flattering light. During my anecdotes, Jenna would laugh and agree with me and, in general, make me feel like everything I said was important. I liked this. At the time, Jenna was dating a guy named Tommy and she would tell stories about him, so I felt like the whole thing was harmless.

The relationship continued when Jenna took my social media class the next year. At first, I was really happy to see her name on my roster. We had chemistry and our back and forth made the class more fun for everyone in it. However, when Jenna showed up, she no longer had a boyfriend.

She is a really beautiful girl and I couldn't help but notice this when she walked in the first day. She wasn't just another great student anymore. I started thinking of her in the same way I thought about Amanda when we were classmates.

Gone were Jenna's sweatpants and t-shirts. She dressed like a woman. I was flattered because I knew it was for me. The conversations in class were innocent, but when we were alone, the flirtation picked up. All this was happening when Amanda was trying to get pregnant with Sammi.

During this time, my usually frigid wife was like a drill sergeant about sex. "We have to do it right now." "Now wait." "Hand me that pillow." "Don't masturbate for at least two days." All the clinical orders sucked the fun out of our sex life and it felt nice to have this really young, smart, beautiful woman want me.

When Amanda got pregnant with Sammi, and for the first few months after Sammi was born, I managed to convince myself I was happy and I found myself avoiding Jenna. I focused on Amanda, poured all my extra time and attention into being there for her.

I knew I almost took things too far with Jenna and I wanted the distance. Lately, I've been feeling the attraction again. Jenna is a senior now, and she's auditing my research seminar. She looks even more mature and I'm incredibly attracted to her.

We text a lot and I've taken her to lunch a few times under the guise of talking about research. Sometimes, late at night, after Amanda and the girls are in bed, I've called Jenna. I've begun confiding personal information. I've even told her about some of the problems Amanda and I have been having.

Just thinking these things about Jenna, means that I've already betrayed Amanda. I should feel guilty about doing this. Maybe I would if I didn't believe it was kind of Amanda's fault. My marriage feels like prison, so it feels good to have a woman be sexually attracted to me and to laugh at my jokes and say things that let me know I'm enough. Amanda doesn't do any of that anymore.

I could easily have an affair with Jenna. The reason I haven't is I'm afraid it would destroy my family and I'm not sure I want to do that. At this point, it's not about cheating on Amanda, that I know I could live with, I'm just not sure I want to risk my relationship with Emma, Mady, and Sammi.

Other girls have crushed on me, and all of them have been harmless. Jenna is no longer harmless. She's taking my research class this semester for no credit just because she wants to be close to me. Charlie has told me that Jenna talks about our flirtations to other students, and like today, she often stops by to make sure I know she's available.

I've been trying to keep her available in case I decide I want to have an affair. She's hot and I want to know what it would be like to kiss her. It's gotten so far I'm sure she can tell I'm attracted to her. Our late night calls and texts have erased the boundaries that used to keep her at bay.

There is, however, a clock on my relationship with Jenna. If I can just make it through this semester, then I'm home free. Jenna graduates in December then I won't be tempted anymore. I just have to remind myself that I love my family, and even though and my wife makes me feel like I'm a complete failure, I can't give up everything for this girl.

Jenna walks over and closes the door. I immediately jump up and open the door. She looks at me.

"Oh, I'm in office hours," I say. "I need to keep the door open in case someone else needs to stop in." *And to stop me from pushing you up against the wall and kissing you.*

"Oh." And the pout comes out. She pouts a lot. She thinks it's cute, and to be honest, it kind of is. "I wanted to see you alone. I need to talk to you about my research paper. I'm writing about the communication patterns of older men and younger women who are involved in romantic relationships and I wanted to get your feedback on my sources." Could she be more obvious?

"Yeah, I got your email. Did you look at the articles I sent you?" She scoots closer and hands me a page from her paper. I smell perfume. She touches my leg. I feel the blood rush to my penis.

"Hey guys." Charlie is standing in my office doorway.

I jump up and walk over to him. Thank God for Charlie.

"Hey, Dr. Long." Jenna's tone has lost its playful flirtation making her irritation easy for me to spot. "How are you?"

"Good." Charlie is poised and professional during this exchange, which makes me feel like an oversexed pervert. "Dr. Claridge, I need to see you when you're done. Can you stop by my office?" He's smiling broadly when he says all of this. He's amused by my discomfort. Charlie knows about my situation with Jenna and has run interference for me more than once. I'm pretty sure Jenna hates him, but he saves me from myself.

"Sure. I need to leave in a few minutes anyway. I gotta pick up my daughters and take them to dance class. Jenna, can you email me your question and I'll get back to you later tonight? It'd be a huge favor."

"Ummmm"—she draws the word out—"you still have a few minutes left in your office hours." Her objections are punctuated with that damn pout.

"Please Jenna, you'd really be helping me out." I shoot her my most charming smile.

"Oh, I guess." She finally gives up, but I know she'll be back. She, too, knows she only has a short time before she graduates and she's really upped her efforts. She brushes by me as she leaves. She pauses while her shoulder is still touching my chest. I'm pinned between her and the doorframe. "I'll be here tomorrow for your afternoon office hours. We really need to talk about my research." She moves forward and I'm free.

I stumble backwards and try to regain my composure. What would happen if she told people we're more than just teacher and student? What would the other faculty say if they knew about the late night phone calls? The whole thing sends bolts of terror into my pants and my penis gets back with the program, but I'd be lying if I didn't admit the danger excites me.

I collect my papers and stuff them in my bag. Charlie is still at my door. "Bro, I don't want to tell you what to do, but you have got to get that girl to settle down. The other students know she's totally into you and I'm afraid she's going to start a problem. If you keep this up, there's no way you'll be chair. Anyway, what would Amanda say if she knew about this?"

Charlie means well, and he's right.

The truth is, when Jenna first began flirting with me I was dying to talk to Amanda about the situation. It sounds weird, but she used to be my best friend and I wanted to get it off my chest. I wanted to tell her that I was sorry for ever letting things get this far and that I needed her advice about how to let Jenna down easy.

I tried to mention Jenna to Amanda a while ago when things were much more innocent. I didn't have to say much before I could tell that she felt threatened. As soon as I mentioned Jenna, she morphed into reporter mode, asking too many questions, falling back on an accusatory tone.

I'm not used to Amanda lacking confidence about her appearance, but since we had kids, she's really taken a hit to her self-esteem. Even though she was never super skinny, she has always been totally hot.

Amanda's most attractive quality used to be that she was really comfortable with herself. She believed she was smart, beautiful, and charming. I still see glimpses of this in her, but she has lost some of it. I think that's why I can't talk to her about Jenna. I know she'll be pissed. She'll see that I'd rather be with Jenna. Amanda

will know I see all the confidence she used to have in this young woman and she'll know I find it attractive. She'll never trust me.

We used to be able to talk about anything. Now, it just feels like too much work. Instead of getting her help and advice, I'll just get her bitterness and resentment. I already have enough of that to last me a lifetime.

"I know." Charlie has invoked the name of Amanda, which reminds me to be a good boy. "I'm going to have to tell Jenna to back off. I just thought I'd try to wait until classroom evaluations are over. Besides, as long as you have my back, she's harmless, right?"

"Whatever." Charlie's skeptical gaze and eye roll, punctuates his lack of confidence in me. "You know I'm here to help. I'm just afraid that girl may go psycho if you don't let her down easy. You got plans for this weekend?" *A much needed change of subject.*

"Nothing special. I'm working on a journal article and I was hoping to make some progress on it Saturday and I'm coming in Sunday night to do a review session for my class. I'm giving a test on Tuesday and I said I'd help them prep. Other than that, I'm just going to hang at home with my girls. What about you?"

"Date on Saturday with that girl from my dentist's office. She's super hot." All of Charlie's girls are super hot and they have the shelf life of a carton of eggs.

"What is this? Third date? It's starting to sound serious. Are you ready to settle down and join me in marital bliss?" I gotta talk the talk of a happily married man, even though, just minutes ago, I was thinking it would be nice to have sex with one of my students.

"No, but I am willing to settle down with her for the night. Third date is the sex date. Wish me luck."

"Good luck."

Charlie says good-bye and leaves. I grab my stuff and head out the door. I want to take the girls to dance class and try to heal the damage from the money conversation Amanda and I had earlier. Seeing Jenna has made me feel guilty. I need to try to fix things with Amanda. We need to reconnect, and for me, that's sex. If I play my cards right and really try to make Amanda's life easier, maybe Charlie won't be the only one having sex this weekend.

Chapter 7

Amanda

After we get home from Roxy's, I get Mady dressed to go to the outlet mall.

Turns out Mady would rather smash Play Doh into the rug than get dressed. It's time to make a deal. She is a notorious negotiator. I make an offer. She counters. An agreement is reached. She'll get dressed if I give her a dollar and she can pick her own clothes. I know the books advise mothers to let their kids express themselves through their clothes and not be embarrassed by the choices their kids make, but these experts have never seen Mady's fashion sense at work.

She selects a pair of pajama bottoms with dinosaurs on them, a green turtle neck, and the silky red skirt from one of her princess costumes. We decide that purple and orange butterfly rain boots complete the outfit. When I'm on a losing streak, I go all in.

I struggle to jam the baby into an ill-fitting long sleeve onesie (it's more like three-quarter sleeved when I finally get her in it) and a pair of baby pants that keep riding up to her knees. Because we've had three girls I've been able to reuse a lot of the baby stuff, but Sammi is off by about half a season, so all the clothes I have in her size are for warm weather.

I'm secretly pleased I get to buy her some new stuff. Part of the fun of having baby girls is getting to dress them in cute little outfits and I think it'll be fun to buy some new clothes for her. Just thinking this gives me a twinge of guilt, which is good because it reminds me to get my envelope with my rewards cards and coupons. At least, when I show Chris what I've bought for the baby, I'll be able to show him I really tried to save money.

The phone rings just as I'm crawling into the driver's seat. It's Chris's mom. She lives on the other side of town in a nice, little apartment Chris helped her find after his dad died. Mady and Sammi are strapped into their car seats, watching a kids show on the minivan's DVD player, so I take a deep breath and answer. "Hey, Linda. How's it going?"

"Hey," she says. "Is Chris there?"

"Um...no, he's teaching, did you try his cell?" I trap the phone between my shoulder and ear while organizing all my travel supplies on the seat beside me.

She knows he's teaching. She knows this is my cell phone and he's not around. She wants me to do something for her, but instead of just asking me, she goes through this charade first. It drives me nuts, but I never say anything, Chris loses his mind when I say anything critical of his precious mother.

"Yeah, it went straight to voicemail. Do you know when he'll be back?"

"He teaches until afternoon and then has office hours. He's supposed to be home in time to pick up the girls for dance class at five. Do you need something, Linda?"

"Well, I don't want to bother you, but I have a prescription refill at the store and I don't really have the energy to go pick it up."

I immediately feel bad. Linda is in her early sixties and she's had a lot of health problems. The most major was kidney failure. She went through this right before Emma was born. The doctors never figured out what happened, but Linda was on dialysis for a long time and we were lucky they found a donor kidney.

Since the operation, things have been much better, although she still has a lot of tiredness from the whole ordeal. I know her needs are legitimate and I want to help. It's not easy because sometimes I feel like I spend half my day helping her and the other half taking care of my kids. It's exhausting.

"I'll get it." I raise the pitch of my voice slightly in an attempt to mask my irritation.

"No, no, honey, it's okay. I'll go out later and pick it up, after I take a nap."

"No, Linda, it's fine, I'm in the car now with the girls. We're heading to the outlets to get some clothes for Sammi, so I'll just stop by the store, and your house on the way home."

It'd be nice if she wouldn't make me go through the same song and dance every time. I wish she'd just ask me to do whatever it is she needs and save me the energy of insisting on doing her a favor.

"Oh, okay, honey." I hate when she calls me honey. It feels condescending. "While you're at the store, could you pick up a few things? If it's not too much trouble."

Ugh. "Sure, what do you need?" I'm already searching through my purse for a piece of paper and a pencil.

The search for pencil and paper is fruitless. A crayon and old receipt will have to do. She goes through a list of about twenty items. I'll get them and her pills. I'll pay for all of it and my husband, who questioned me about buying warm clothes for our child, will insist that we refuse to take his mother's money. It's really sweet that he wants to take care of his mother. It would also be really sweet if he had the same kind of attitude when it came to taking care of me.

My family is very small, so my relatives don't factor into our relationship. I'm an only child, which is one of the reasons I want a lot of kids. When I was young, I would make believe I had a brother and sister, and even though I'm grown, I still feel that I'm missing something because I don't have a sibling.

After my dad died, my mom moved to Florida and she only makes it to Ohio once a year. She doesn't care for the bad weather, and now that she's retired, she's filled her life with golf and tennis. Even though she helps us out occasionally, she's made it clear that she doesn't want to give any up her freedom to go back to a life of responsibility.

Chris, on the other hand, has his whole family close by. I want more of my family here, and since my mom won't accommodate this, having kids is the only way to do it. Chris is worried about a fourth baby, but we could make it work. Besides, if we didn't have to help support Linda, then we'd have plenty of money for another kid.

Linda's voice pulls me back to the conversation.

"You sure this is okay, Amanda, honey?"

"Yep. No problem, I gotta run now."

"Okay, good-bye."

"Bye."

Even before I hit the button to end the call, I know it's going to be a long day and just thinking about lugging the kids through the outlets, trying to wrangle Mady while I buy baby clothes, reloading them, and unloading them, and pulling them through the grocery store while I shop for my mother-in-law makes me tired—a feeling I've been getting more and more often. My life exhausts me and instead of enjoying it, I have to prepare myself for it.

Chapter 8

Chris

I'm at dance class watching through the glass window divider as my little angels, Emma and Mady, dance awkwardly around the room. God, I love my girls. Emma sees me watching and does a special spin just for me. She follows it by blowing me a kiss. She's perfect. Mady sees this and does the same. She's perfect, too.

My mom just called me. She asked Amanda to help her with groceries and her prescriptions. Of course, Amanda agreed to help my mother. Amanda always agrees to help my mother, but then I have to pay a price for it. I know my wife will be aggravated and instead of just saying, "Hey, I'm annoyed. Tell your mom not to ask for my help anymore," she'll be all passive aggressive and look at me like I'm the worst person she's ever met.

I always feel like I've disappointed Amanda when she's pissed. When I ask her what's wrong, she'll tell me everything is

"fine" and not mean it for a minute. We go through this at least twice a week.

When we were dating, Amanda and my mom got along really well. They both loved me and would bond by ganging up on me about my disinterest in doing laundry or my habit of turning ESPN on every time I walked into a room with a television.

When Mom got sick, Amanda was my rock. My dad wasn't doing well either, and he had to go live in an assisted care facility. He couldn't take care of Mom, so Amanda helped me arrange Mom's care and it was Amanda who was with me every step of the way, holding my hand, and telling me it would be okay.

After Emma was born and Amanda quit her job at the paper, she started taking my mom to dialysis appointments and my sister, Jackie, and I really relied on Amanda to handle all the medical stuff.

Those days are long gone. Don't get me wrong. Amanda still takes care of most of my mom's needs, she's just grown bitter. She used to show real concern and I genuinely thought she loved my mom. Now, I kind of think Amanda would be happier if my mom would have died. It's hard to know this about my wife.

So, instead of enjoying the way my wife and my mom interact, I'm tense every time they're in the same room together. It's difficult to negotiate the two of them.

The one thing Mom and Amanda agree on is the girls. They both love them and enjoy spending time with them. Amanda knows that my mom loves the kids, but she is still critical of the *way* Mom loves them. Mom buys them candy all the time and she spends loads of money (that she doesn't have) on elaborate toys. I think Amanda is ungrateful and that she needs to get over it. I can't tell her this.

One time I told Amanda that she was too hard on Mom and we fought for three days over every wrong thing my mom had ever done. If I sided with my mom about the girls, it would be an epic battle and I know I would lose. I know this because I always lose. Amanda can remember every wrong thing I've ever done and she throws it in my face when we argue. This is the main reason I don't like to engage her. I know I can't match her on the details. I'll just take my lumps when I get home tonight. There will be lots of snide remarks and Amanda will share her daily victim story, but I won't react I'll just sit back and take it.

My phone makes the bird chirp noise that means I have a text. It's Jenna.

Can't wait 2CU. Lots 2 talk about. I smile. At least someone is looking forward to my company.

I text her back. *Like what?*

She texts back. *U know, stuff, us.*

It's wrong, but in spite of the way Jenna tortures the English language, I'm enjoying myself. I step out into the hallway where I can't see my innocent daughters through the glass. Once they are safely out of sight, I hit the button that dials Jenna's number.

"I got your text." My face feels flushed when I hear her voice. Everything about her brings me to life.

"I see that." She doesn't even try to hide the enthusiasm in her voice. It's like every message she sends to me is designed to make me feel sexy and happy about myself. "Where are you?"

"I'm downtown." I omit the fact that I'm with my daughters. I've been doing this a lot lately. It's almost like I'm living a double life. There is a compartment for my family man self and a completely separate one for my work self. It just makes it easier.

"Do you want to meet? We could grab a drink?" Her voice is so enticing. I want to say yes.

"No, I just wanted to hear your voice. I've been thinking about you." *If I wasn't with Emma and Mady, would I say "yes"?*

"That's nice to hear." Her seductive purr melts me. "I've been thinking about you, too. I was just trying to figure out what I should wear tomorrow when I see you."

"I'm sure, whatever it is, you'll look incredible."

"I'd look even more incredible on a real date." She's getting more demanding, her innuendos starting to sound like ultimatums.

"I can't do that right now," I say. "My life is too complicated."

"You need to ditch the bitch and move on." The tantrum reminds me that there is a downside to a middle-aged man dating an emotionally unstable co-ed.

I wince at the way she refers to Amanda, but I really can't blame Jenna for that. Whatever impression she has of Amanda is based solely on my description.

I decide to ignore her statement. "I gotta run right now. I'll see you tomorrow, right?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Bye."

"Bye, babe."

I feel a rush as I hang up the phone. Talking to Jenna always makes me feel alive and wanted. There is a huge smile plastered on my face as I reenter the dance gallery. The smile immediately leaves my face when I see Emma and Mady and guilt replaces my happiness.

Chapter 9

Amanda

I put Sammi down for a late afternoon nap. Chris has the girls at dance and I have an hour or so to get some housework done, and to pull together something for dinner. There is a rotisserie chicken I got at the store when I was running errands for Linda warming in the oven. After I heat up some frozen corn, open a jar of applesauce, and throw together a quick salad, I'll be good to go.

When my less-than-impressive dinner is on the table, I still have a few minutes, so I decide to call Roxy. I'm not sure how I'll get Chris to talk about our relationship, but I know Roxy's right. Chris and I need to have it out.

"Hey." Even I hear the false happiness in my voice.

"How are you?" It's clear from her tone she's concerned that I'm getting so dark about my marriage.

"I'm okay. I was thinking about what we were talking about earlier and I know that you're right. I need to talk to Chris and really put it all on the table. I'm just really not sure I know how to get it started. I need some advice."

"I don't know if there is any real advice to give." I only have to give a second before she dives in. "Let the fireworks happen. Once you've got it out there, you'll have to deal with it. My mother always said that the more passionate the fight, the more passionate the love."

"Your mother was very wise, but I'm not sure that throwing everything out there at once is a good idea. I'm worried I'll say things I'll regret and I'm sure he'll be a complete asshole."

"That's the point. You guys need to be honest. Say the mean things that are on your mind. Let him be an asshole. You need to scream at each other so you can start to love each other again. You need to stop avoiding hard conversations and bottling up your resentments. Even if the conversation is difficult to have, even if you rip each other apart, you'll be able to rebuild."

"Okay." It sounds so easy when she says it, but I know from experience it's not. "I'll try, but I can't help but think it may just be easier to get a divorce."

"No. No divorce. At least, not yet. Chris is mostly a good guy, you need to try to find the good guy again and then see where you are. Besides, if the two of you get divorced it'll only be a matter of time before he marries a much younger woman and begins listening to her instead of you. Is that what you want?"

I hadn't thought of this. "No." The word comes out as a hushed squeak. "That's terrifying."

"Good. Whatever it takes to motivate you." She takes a pause. "Although... it could be fun for you to date. We could go out and meet guys together."

"Even more terrifying. I don't want to start over and after hearing your horror stories, God only knows the types of men I'd be meeting."

"It is pretty slim pickings right now. I think we stick to the plan. Talk to him tonight and let me know how it goes."

"I'll try. Will you be around tomorrow for coffee?" I change the subject.

"No, Mandy, I'm sorry. I'll be out. Lawrence is coming over early and we're going to have a spa day." Lawrence is Roxy's gay

best friend. He's younger than both of us, somewhere around thirty. I'm not sure because he won't confirm the details.

He's also hot. He's tall and lean. His body is flawless. He has longish blond hair that always looks perfectly rumpled. From what Roxy says, it takes him hours to accomplish this effect.

Lawrence would fit the stereotype of a young gay man. He has a lot of feminine energy and vanity. It's just who he is. I don't spend a lot of time with him, but I know it's not an act. He is one-hundred percent comfortable with himself. He doesn't worry what others think of him, he just stays true to himself. He's a lot like Roxy.

This is part of the reason I find him so intimidating to be around. I don't know who I am and I am definitely not comfortable with myself. Lawrence and Roxy met two years ago when he helped her write a will and plan her estate. He's a lawyer and has his own practice, but he takes off so much to hang out with Roxy that I'm not sure how he keeps it profitable. Lawrence has managed to be the exception to Roxy's rule, there is no way in hell she would ever call him Larry. He's just too perfect for that.

Roxy is the type of woman who has a fabulous gay best friend who possesses confidence and positive energy. I'm not. I would love to have a gay best friend to plan a spa day with me. I'd love him to encourage me to get my nails done, and to spend hours with me shopping, and getting expensive coffee drinks, but this is not my life. This is the type of life that exists only in movies and in my fabulous neighbor's reality.

No self-respecting gay man would choose me. I can't afford the lifestyle and I'm far too dowdy and thrown up on to make a good candidate for a spa day. If I were to have a gay best friend, it would be the type of repressed older gentleman who spent his life in the closet and came out in a way that ruined the family he created by telling himself lies about who he was. He would be bitter and not interested in getting cappuccinos. No, I'm not the type of girl who has a fabulous gay best friend.

"A spa day. Sounds great." I choke back the resentment. Roxy deserves her life, but sometimes, it does make me feel bad. "How is Lawrence?"

Roxy understands that Lawrence and I must exist in different worlds, but we're both in hers, so we get to hear about each other. "He's good. He thinks he's in love again. This time with a guy

named Jonny. I don't think it will last. Jonny doesn't seem like he really appreciates Lawrence."

No one ever "appreciates" Lawrence. That's why he's still single. He's got incredibly high standards. "That's too bad. Well, I should go. Have a good time tomorrow. And, Roxy..."

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for always listening and giving me the best advice."

"Anytime. I just want you to be happy." She means it.

"Bye."

"Bye."

Roxy makes it sound so easy. I know it's not. Maybe divorce isn't the answer, but I'm not sure the truth is either. I need time to think.

Chapter 10

Chris

I get home and before I can even get my shoes off I can feel trouble brewing. She says she's *fine*, but her tight smile and narrowed, angry eyes tell me she is not at all *fine*. In addition to the look, she keeps making comments to make me feel guilty. "I'm sorry dinner is cold. I fell behind when I had to go into the store and buy twenty things for your mom. Don't worry, I told her not to give us the money for the groceries." Or, "the baby is crabby because she started her nap late. It took us longer than usual because we had to wait in line for fifteen minutes for your mom's prescription."

Passive aggressive bullshit is her medium and no one can make me feel bad about myself the way Amanda can.

When I came home, I felt guilty about my conversation with Jenna. That's been wiped away by Amanda's lack of respect.

I know she's annoyed about my mom. She's always annoyed about my mom. It's more than that. I can't shake the feeling that something else on her mind. Instantly, I think of Jenna. Is there some way Amanda could have discovered our relationship? No, it must be something else that is causing her frosty demeanor.

It wasn't that bad this morning, but she's had the whole day to analyze my every move and come up with reasons why I'm a rotten husband and father. I love that she's raising our kids, but I can't help but think that I wouldn't take such a beating if she had a job outside of the house. Her whole world revolves around our family and that means my behavior is always up for review.

My thoughts are interrupted when Emma and Mady decide it's time for a tag-team battle. It's the two of them versus me and a stuffed bear. I use my best silly voice to make the bear insult them. "Ewww... who farted?" I use a high-pitched, muppet-style tone for maximum humor. "I think Mady stinks."

This gets the desired result. Mady gets a glint in her eye, puts her hands on her hips, cocks her head slightly to one side, and runs full force into my chest. She's like a pint-sized bull charging at a matador. I grab her and swing her into the air. While she's upside down above my head, Emma charges my exposed midsection. I am pushed back, and bring Mady down on top of her sister. They are both all giggles. We repeat this. On the third go around, my timing is off and I bring Mady down on Emma at a weird angle. The girls start crying and grabbing at hurt body parts. Oops.

"What in God's name is going on here?" Amanda comes running into the living room from the kitchen to see the carnage. She immediately goes to the girls and comforts them, one on each side, shooting me a disgusted look. "Chris, they're hurt."

"Sorry." My playful muppet voice is replaced with an apologetic tone. "We were playing and it got a little out of control. I think they're fine. You're fine, aren't you girls?" I shoot a wink towards Emma. She'll protect me. Even if I broke her arm, I know she has my back.

"Yeah," Emma says. "I'm okay, Mommy. Daddy was playing with us. It was fun." She's sniffling, but I can see she's really okay. "Wasn't it fun, Mady?"

Mady nods yes. She's also settling down. They're fine. It was just a little too physical. I'll try to tone it down next time, but I get carried away when they start to have fun and giggle. I'm addicted to little girl giggles. Once I have one, I need more.

Amanda knows the girls are protecting me. It just seems to annoy her more. What the hell is wrong with her? I can't do anything right tonight. I guess this means I'm not getting laid tonight. Or ever. I pull out my phone and look at Jenna's social media page.

Chapter 11

Amanda

I'm being a bitch, but I can't seem to help myself. I'm annoyed because I know I *need* to talk to Chris about our relationship, but I don't *want* to do it. Ever since Roxy told me that if Chris and I get divorced, he could get remarried, and stop listening to me while I'm forced to date a long line of losers, I've been terrified.

There is so much distance between the two of us I don't know how to start the conversation. I'm really glad that he's a good father who plays with his kids, even if it means they sometimes get rough, but I know I just acted like he needed to have the girls taken away by the state. I'm not even sure why I'm so mean to him. I can't help it anymore. Things would be so much easier if he were just gone.

We manage to get through dinner and homework without any more major incidents, mostly because we talk to the kids and

not to each other. It's an act we have put on a lot lately, nice cheery voices for the kids, clipped tones for each other. We are so incredibly skilled at appearing happy while in truth, we're becoming more dysfunctional by the hour.

I know this has to stop and that we can't fake it anymore. Neither of us is truly happy. We're not friends anymore and we can't connect. Our marriage is in extreme distress and we're at a crossroads. Either we talk about it and figure out a way to fix it or we hire lawyers, bang out a custody agreement, and walk away.

I've decided after I get the kids to sleep tonight, I'm going to confront my fears, and have an honest conversation with my husband about my feelings. I don't want it to be fireworks. Instead, I feel that it should be calm and rational and I think we can do it.

After all, this is my Chris. I've known him for a long time. We've been through richer and poorer and sickness and health. We can find a way through this. The decision to talk immediately makes me feel better. I'm almost genuinely happy as I put the kids through the bedtime routine. Things are going to change.

After I lay Sammi in her crib, I walk into our room and look at the figure of my sleeping husband. He is naked and vulnerable. His mouth is open and he's snoring lightly. The conversation needs to happen and I should wake him up, but seeing him like this makes me feel tired, too. Maybe I'm just delaying the inevitable, but I decide to wait one more day. It's just easier.

I put on my pajamas, brush my teeth, take out my contacts, and crawl into bed next to him. My brain is buzzing and it's hard for me to shut it down. I think about all the things I want to talk to him about. All the problems we need to fix. It takes me a couple of hours, but I finally fall into a restless sleep.

The lids of my eyes are being pried open by sticky, little fingers. Little girl giggles ring out like a bell. I'd recognize that sound anywhere. It's Mady. Her finger slips and pokes me in the eye. *Ouch.* I carefully open the non-poked eye. It's early and I barely slept last night, Sammi was up at six a.m., so I just brought her downstairs. We both fell asleep in the recliner.

"Good morning, Mady." My good eye is still closed.

"Why you sleeping? Don't you know it's morning?" With the tight line of her mouth and her squished together eyebrows, Mady looks stern.

"You're right. I'm awake now." Even though I'm still half asleep, I force both of my eyes open and reach for my glasses. After a few minutes of awkward fumbling, I can see clearly.

"Sammi needs to be awake, too." Her gaze lands on her peacefully sleeping baby sister.

"No, Mady, Sammi needs to sleep." I pull her closer to me and then gesture for Mady to crawl onto the other side of my lap. "Do you want cuddles?"

"No. Wake Sammi up. It's morning." Her face looks defiant as she issues her command.

"Come on Mady, just crawl up here and cuddle. It's still too early." A big yawn escapes my mouth and punctuates my point.

Now, Mady is getting upset. She doesn't like it when things don't go her way. She's constantly testing her boundaries.

"No, Mommy. I'm going to wake Sammi up. If I'm up, Sammi needs to be awake, too." And with that Mady hauls back and hits the baby on the head. Sammi wakes up startled, and after a brief pause starts screaming. Now, I'm fully alert.

"Mady, why did you hurt sissy?" I whisper-yell while I clutch my infant to my chest. "That was a bad thing to do."

Mady is insulted by the reprimand. Her large brown eyes fill with tears and she starts crying and buries her head in my lap. The wails emanating from both girls fill the empty house. They are loud and inconsolable. Where the hell is Chris? I clearly need someone to back me up right now. There is no way he could be sleeping through all this screaming.

I scramble to find the TV remote. A cartoon is just what I need to distract Mady. First, I dig my hand into the corner of the recliner. This search pulls up nothing. Then I swivel my head to look under the coffee table. Nothing.

I'm doing this while trying to comfort the girls. I'm squishing them and rearranging them on my lap while I search. Crap. Where is the damn thing? I rock the recliner forward and hear a crunch. I pry free the remote. The top is smashed in a little, but thank God, it still works. I turn the television to a show that features a puppet mouse looking through a toy chest. Mady immediately quiets like she's just been put under a wizard's spell.

Silencing one girl brings some relief. Now, I have to quiet the baby. I look at the half full bottle of formula sitting on the side table. When did I get this one? The canister says that you have to use it in an hour. Has it been more than an hour? I'm not sure, but

I know the bottle will soothe Sammi, so I go with it. The formula may be a few minutes past the recommended use time, but I'm sure they pad those, right?

It takes a few minutes for me to restore the early morning peace. Sammi takes the bottle and Mady is distracted by the television. I know I'm not supposed to use the television to parent my children. Chris constantly reminds me that it's bad for them, but sometimes I really need the distraction. Particularly when my husband doesn't show up to help.

There are only the first traces of light coming into the living room. I got maybe five hours of rest last night. Little kids are great, but they are capable of making their mothers disappear, one hour of sleep at a time.

After a few minutes, I accept my fate and decide to get the day started. It's almost time for Emma to get up for school anyway. Mady gently rolls off my arm and onto the recliner as I stand up. She's okay as long as she can see the television. I put Sammi in the play yard and start the coffee. I'm torn about my feelings for Chris. I want nothing more than to talk to him, but I'm also avoiding the hard conversation. When my relationship with Chris is difficult, I'm thankful for the distraction of three kids.

Chapter 12

Chris

Emma just got on the school bus and I finally have a few minutes to myself. I had a cancelation, so I don't have to be on campus for another hour, which means I can take a little time to think about last night and this morning.

Amanda wasn't quite as chilly when we got up. But instead of appreciating this, I was distant. I can't help it. I'm really annoyed. I wish Amanda would just tell me what is wrong and whether she's mad at me or not.

I can't tell what's going on in her head and she's not willing giving up any information. That's the hard part of being married to her. She keeps it bottled up and I end up playing a bizarre guessing game where I try to figure out what I've done to piss her off, how I'm going to justify it, and whether I should just ignore the problem or have it out with her.

It's really hard for me when she's mad. I don't have a lot of close friends. I thought I'd marry Amanda and we'd be best friends forever, just like the early days. In the last year or so, I've started to rely more on Charlie, and lately it's been Jenna who is my best friend. It's not that I even want another best friend or to replace Amanda, I just want to feel connected to my wife.

This is why I always tell her how beautiful she is and I tell her I want to have sex with her. When we have sex, we connect. Not just literally, having sex brings out her vulnerable side and she lets me in. It has been a long time since she's been vulnerable, or even needed me for anything. Most of the time, I just feel like my very presence in her life is irritating her.

It's becoming increasingly difficult for me to find any vulnerability in my wife. Before I know it, I'm thinking about Jenna. She is always vulnerable—always putting herself out there and always available to me. I barely have a chance to type something onto my social media page before Jenna has "liked" the comment.

Thinking about Jenna is not what I should be doing right now. I need to focus on Amanda, but I'm not sure I want to. In an attempt to wipe both women from my mind, I tune the radio onto a sports talk show. Thank God for sports talk. I listen to it the whole way to work.

When I'm at work I'm in the zone. I answer emails, finish prepping the test review, and take an early lunch with Charlie. We go to a restaurant right off campus and have a few beers with our food. Drinking with friends during the day makes up for the some of the monotony of life at home with my wife and kids

When I get back, Jenna is waiting for me. I'm a little drunk and Charlie has to leave for a meeting, so he can't hang around and offer me cover.

"Hey, Jenna." I flash her a flirtatious smile.

"Hey, Dr. Claridge." She smiles back. She looks good in a tight black sweater and even tighter jeans. I like what she decided to wear and I know it's all for me. It feels nice to have a woman dress to seduce me. Amanda won't even take off her T-shirt when we have sex anymore.

Jenna follows me into my office. I sit at the computer and she sits in the seat closest to me. We talk about her paper and I'm impressed at how good her research project is. This girl is smart. She should go to graduate school. I tell her this. She tells me it's only because I'm such a great teacher.

"You know before I took that first class with you, I was thinking about quitting school and marrying Tommy," she says. "You made school so much fun that I decided to stay and really take it seriously. You changed my life, Dr. C."

"Call me Chris," I say. "Not in class or in front of the other students"—I backpedal a little—"but when it's just the two of us, you should call me Chris."

I feel my body slowing, moving closer to her. I want to grab her and kiss her. She senses my attraction and moves closer. I don't pull away this time, instead I lean in. Our mouths meet and the passion explodes. Her lips are soft under mine. She parts them and her tongue prods my mouth. I open it and accept the kiss.

All the flirting, smiling, brushing, and joking have finally turned physical. It's a relief, like I've been holding my breath for years and I can finally let it out. Our kiss starts off tentatively, but it doesn't take long until she's pushing her mouth hard against mine. I pull my lips out from under hers and move to her throat.

She whispers, "I have been waiting for this. I want this." It's only seconds until she's cleared the distance between our seats and is on top of me, straddling me.

I kiss her mouth again and then move back to her neck. I slip my hands down her back and onto her ass. I use them to bring her in even closer to me, until there is no space between us. I feel the warm weight of her body. She reaches down and grabs her sweater, pulling it over her head and discarding it into a heap on the floor beside the chair.

She moans and adjusts herself to make room for her hand to slip between our bodies. She holds my face with one hand while she moves the other down my body and in between my legs. I am already hard and this touch makes me feel like a teenager about to explode before I can even get my pants off. I smell the intoxicating scent of her naked skin and I push the cups of her bra up until my hand finds her naked breast. It's tiny and firm. It's the breast of a young woman and I want to put it in my mouth. I push her back and kiss the flesh on her chest, my thumb is still working the nipple, and then my mouth finds it.

She moans. "Yes, yes, more."

Just then the phone rings and interrupts the moment. Jenna reaches over without missing a beat and uses her free hand to pull the phone off the cradle for a second before it drops back into place. This maneuver ends the ringing.

I know I should stop, but she's moving her hand now and all I can think about is stripping her naked. My penis has its own agenda and I am desperate to free it from the confines of my underwear.

Somewhere in the background, I hear the phone again and this time it's enough to bring my rational mind back into the game. I come crashing back to reality and I jump up from my chair.

Jenna falls off my lap and onto the floor, her naked breasts popped out below her bra. My penis is so hard I feel like it's going to rip through my pants. If the phone wouldn't have rung we would have had sex right here in my office and I can't decide whether I'm thankful for the interruption or annoyed by it.

"Hello. D...Dr. Claridge," I'm breathing heavier than usual as I speak into the receiver. I'm having a hard time speaking at all because Jenna is off the floor and she is pressing her body against mine. She kisses my neck and my ears. Now that she has more space to work with, she has my pants unfastened and she is working to free my trapped penis. I'm having a hard time concentrating, but I manage to understand the person on the other end of the line.

I hang up the phone allow Jenna to continue for a few seconds more, before I grab her face and kiss her hard. Finally, I manage to pull away and look at her with regret. "It's Dr. Rupert," I explain. "She wants to see me to go over some paperwork. I tried to stall, but she's my boss and she wants to meet now."

Jenna is clearly disappointed, but judging by the satisfied glimmer of pride in her eyes, she knows she made significant progress. She opens her mouth to protest, but instead snaps it shut, and looks me up and down then tilts her lips into a sly smile. "You know, I was just about to give you the best blow job you've ever had."

I close my eyes and take a minute to picture it—her head bobbing up and down. I want to call Sally and cancel, but I know it's not an option.

"Oh, baby." I grab her and kiss her again. "You're gonna make me lose my job."

She smiles at this comment, and I feel a shiver of fear stab at my heart. "Don't worry. We can pick this up later."

I know I shouldn't say it. I should be a good husband and father, but the words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. "You bet."

She shoves her breasts back into her bra and pulls the sweater over her head. She straightens out the rest of her clothes and walks up to me, pulls my face down to hers, and kisses me again. She slides her hands over my chest and grabs my crotch. She gives a half-giggle half-squeal of appreciation as she touches the hardness. The kiss lasts for about thirty seconds then Jenna leaves. I'm so turned on, I don't know how I'm going to talk to Sally.

When Sally and I are done going over a supplemental contract, I get a minute to process what happened with Jenna. Part of me feels extremely guilty and the other part is excited. I didn't mean to do it, but I've given Jenna a green light and I don't know how to take it back. Instead of fixing it, I focus my guilt at home. I call Amanda and offer to pick up a pizza for family movie night. It's the least I can do.

Chapter 12

Amanda

Chris just called me. He said he's sorry. I'm sure he has no understanding of why he should be sorry, but at least he apologized. He's going to bring home dinner and stop and get a movie as a peace offering.

I'm trying to let go of the nagging annoyance that he's willing to spend money on pizza and a movie, while I clip coupons to buy bread. And, pizza? Don't get me started. Nothing says, "I surrender" like ordering a pizza. It's what we do when I can't get my act together to make dinner and I don't want to fight with the kids to make them eat something healthy. I feel like a failure every time one of the big, white boxes enters my house. However, the guilt doesn't stop me from doing it at least once a week.

I try not to get caught up feeling sorry for myself. If I can let the bitterness go, tonight could be nice. We could have a good

time and follow it with a serious conversation about working on the problems in our marriage.

Most evenings, I have to fight to get him off his computer. Tonight, he wants to watch a movie with us. It's stupid and naive, but I'm excited by the prospects of this impromptu family night.

I fantasize about peaceful nights with my husband and daughters. If we can carve out a few hours free from distractions and just enjoy our time together, I know I'll be happier. Maybe, if Chris is really in a contrite mood, I'll be able to explain my concerns about our relationship, we'll work together to come up with a plan to get things back on the right track, then I'll convince him that we should try again to have a baby boy.

It seems ridiculous because we have three healthy, happy kids and our marriage has been running into the ditch, but I really feel compelled to have a son. I know Chris has always wanted a boy. I feel like a failure because I've never been able to give him that.

When you are a modern woman who has grown up knowing you can do anything and make any choice you want, there is something brave about choosing to be a mom who stays home and takes care of her family and raises her children. I'm just as driven as I was in college and at my job as a reporter. Now, the scoring system isn't as easy to quantify.

I still remember the disappointment on my dad's face when I told him I was quitting my job to stay home with Emma. It sticks with me because it was such a stark contrast to his reaction to my other choices. When I got into college, he bragged to all his friends about it. When I got my first job, he'd proudly introduce me as his daughter, the journalist, but when I got the job title of Emma's mommy, he thought I was throwing away all that I had built. There was no bragging, no introducing me as his daughter, the mother. He died shortly after Emma was born and I still remember thinking about this during the funeral. I felt like I let him down.

Stay-at-home moms have to create their own standards. Everyone understands traditional workplace success. You can brag to your friends about promotions and raises and tell acceptable anecdotes about the people in the office. It's different when you funnel your energy into being a wife and mom. Telling stories about your kids is seen as bragging by some and just plain annoying by others. Society has worked hard to provide women with

alternatives to being homemakers, so to choose this option is now seen as antiquated and the easy way out (which it isn't).

I know I have a great skill set and I could be anything. This knowledge doesn't exempt me from feeling like I need to be extra hard on myself because I chose to make my family my career. The way my kids turn out is my work product. Their grades in school, their extracurricular activity participation, the baked goods for fundraisers, and the photos of extravagant celebrations are my professional portfolio items. These are the outcomes of my career and the criteria by which I judge my success.

I feel personally responsible my husband has often and publicly proclaimed that he wants a son and I have only given birth to daughters. I know it makes no sense, but to me this is a professional failing and I need to try to add a son to our inventory of children. I don't want Chris to look back at our lives and think, *if only she had had boys instead of girls, I could have really been satisfied and happy*. Maybe it's irrational. After all you can't control the gender of your children, but I think having another baby would make us closer and would make me feel more successful.

I have just finished picking up toys when the door opens and I hear the little voices of Emma and Mady. My smile is involuntary, it just happens when I hear my kids. Chris is dragging behind a little. He's not in the door yet when the girls come running up.

"Mommy, Mommy, Daddy brought pizza and Grandma." Emma's face is lit by a huge grin to accompany her announcement. "Grandma is here."

"Grandma is here." Mady repeats what her sister says.

My smile disappears—wiped from my face by resentment. Grandma is here. Ugh, so much for a nice evening with *my* family. I make a half-hearted attempt to swallow back the anger at being blindsided. I was at Linda's place earlier this afternoon to move her outdoor furniture off the porch and into the garage for winter and the girls decided to stay for an hour until their dad got off of work and could pick them up. Linda didn't say anything about coming over tonight. I talked to Chris when he called to apologize and he didn't say anything about bringing his mom over for our pizza and movie night.

Why didn't they run it by me? I'm upset Linda is here because I feel left out. I feel like they leave me out a lot. They make the decisions and I'm the one responsible for executing them.

Chris comes in the door with his mother. "Hi, Linda." I take her jacket. "Hey, Chris." I give him a single nod to acknowledge his existence.

"You don't mind that I'm here, do you, honey?"

Don't fucking honey me.

"Nope, family is always welcome." My fake smile is so tight I'm surprised the words are able to escape from my mouth. She is *not* welcome. Not tonight, anyway. I'm still resentful no one asked me. I'm resentful I have to give up my plans for a nice quiet night with my husband and daughters. I'm resentful I won't be able to talk to Chris about our problems. I push it all deep down into my gut and try to be a good girl.

We eat pizza in the living room and watch the movie. Even though I still catch him looking at his phone, Chris seems extra attentive toward me and the girls. This is what I would have liked, had his mother not been there.

The movie features talking animals and a Hollywood heartthrob who needs to learn a lesson about spending time with his family. I hope Chris is taking note of the movie's theme. When the movie ends, Chris drives his mom home and I fight the girls into pajamas.

By the time he gets home, I've had too long to think and I'm thoroughly aggravated. The apology from earlier today is long forgotten. I decide I've finally had enough and I'm going to try to talk to him about my feelings. This bitterness can't go on any longer. It's become hard for me to talk to Chris and we're not connecting anymore. Roxy is right. We need to have it out.

When he gets back Mady and Emma are in their bedroom looking at books. "Can we talk?" I ask when he walks into our bedroom. I am holding the baby and trying to seem reasonable and approachable.

"Sure," he says, but he doesn't look sure.

Chapter 13

Chris

Oh shit. She wants to talk. This will not be good. I've known it was coming and I think it's about my mom? Or work? Or the kids? Or Jenna? Oh hell, I never know why I'm in trouble.

I'm tired after working all day then spending my night watching a silly movie with my mom and kids instead of working on a journal article I need to finish by the end of the month. I feel guilty because I made out with my student today and all evening I was thinking about how good it felt. Amanda accepted my apology earlier. I thought I was in the clear until I saw her face when I came home. Tight smile, narrowed eyes, pissed off.

It must be about me working too much. I know she was annoyed when I checked my social media and texts on my phone during the movie. Some kids told me they would text me questions (and Jenna was sending me messages).

What am I supposed to do? I'm a little behind because I got distracted during my office hours. I want to be able to enjoy a movie night with the family. It's just not possible. Not to mention, I have to be a son, too. When I went over to get Emma and Mady, Mom told me she missed my dad a lot today. He's been dead for a little over a year now, and we both still wish he was still around. When she feels sad, I should be there to fix it for her.

Now, I've dropped her off and all I want to do is go to bed and have sex with my wife (after my encounter this afternoon, all I can think about is having sex) and sleep a full eight hours. My idea of a good end to this night went out the window when she said, "Can we talk?"

"I just feel like you don't want to be here." She shakes her head and purses her lips. I can tell she thinks she's being reasonable, but she's overcorrected and it's coming off as condescending. "I really thought we could have a good night with the girls, then you brought your mother home and didn't even ask me. I don't understand why you don't care about what I want."

Here we go. She's throwing all the blame my way. Talking about our relationship right now is the last thing I want to do, but if she wants to fight, I'll fight.

"I'm sorry." I exaggerate my tone. "I thought that if we were spending time as a family it would be *okay* to bring family, I didn't realize I had to clear every move with the queen."

"Don't be a dick," she says.

I was being a dick and I have plans to continue being a dick. "Look, I'm tired and I don't want to deal with your drama tonight. You can tell me what a rotten husband and father I am in the morning."

"I'm not calling you a rotten husband and father. Why do you always try to put words in my mouth? I just want to talk to you about how you make me feel."

"I just want to talk to you about how you make me feel." My words are whiny as I mock her. I know she hates this and I feel like punishing her for ruining my plans.

Any hope of having sex flew out the window when she decided we needed to talk, so I have no need to try to diffuse this situation. In fact, I have a fleeting thought that if I make this fight bad enough, maybe I can leave and then I'll be free to see Jenna tonight, possibly even rent a hotel room.

"I know how you *feel*." I exaggerate the word "feel" just to emphasize how stupid this conversation is. "You *feel* like I should do anything you tell me to do. You *feel* like I should make millions of dollars and work only ten hours a week. You *feel* like your life should be easy. You *feel* like I should be happy with a weekly appointment for boring, missionary position sex. You *feel* like I don't do enough. You *feel* like I love my mommy more than I love you. You make your long list of complaints, oh sorry, I mean *'feelings'*" —I add exaggerated air quotes to the word—"very clear every day."

"Wow, you have me figured out don't you, Dr. Claridge?" Her tone could freeze water to icebergs. I hate when she throws the academic credential in my face. It makes me sound like a pompous prick. "I'm a total irrational, ungrateful, withholding bitch. Is that what you really think about me?"

"Well, you said it," I say quietly, cruelly.

The door to our room opens. It's Emma. She heard us fighting and now she's coming in to break it up. There is nothing like looking in the face of your kid after you've just hurt her mother to make a man feel like a waste of cells and oxygen.

"Mommy? Daddy?" Her quiet, small voice and worried face slap us both back to reality.

"Yeah, sweetheart." Amanda shoots me a look that could kill as she stoops down to talk to Emma. She blames me because the girls heard our fight. I guess she just forgot that she started the whole nasty business. I shoot her an equally evil look. *Take that.*

"Can you come into our room for night-night?"

"Yeah, I'll come in, baby." *Super Amanda to the rescue.*

"Daddy, too?" She looks at me with big brown eyes. She's on the verge of crying and needs us both to make her feel secure before bed. I'll have to push back all this resentment and put on a happy face for my kids. It's the least I can do.

"Sure." I get up and walk over to Emma. Two can play at this game. "I'll come in for night-night." Night-night is what we call our bedtime routine. Amanda usually does this alone while I go to my office and work on research projects, but on Friday nights, we sometimes do it together and it's clear that after hearing us argue, Emma wants us both.

I pick up Emma, and Amanda carries the baby into the girls' room. When we get there Emma snuggles into her bed and I take a

seat on the edge, Amanda and the baby sit on the edge of Mady's bed. Mady speaks up first, "Twinkle Star, please," she says. We all sing Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.

"Itsy Bitsy Spider, Daddy's way," says Emma. I get up, stand in the center of the room between the two twin beds and sing a solo of Itsy Bitsy Spider complete with hand gestures and light tickles.

Thank God for the kids. There is something about singing a kids song to an adoring audience of giggling little girls that makes it possible to disguise all the anger I felt just moments ago. They are pure sweetness and love.

"Okay," says Amanda, "time for prayers and wishes." *Bossy bitch.*

We all recite, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, may angels watch me through the night, until I wake to morning's light. Amen." This is what Amanda did before bed when she was little.

The second part is wishes, when I was little this is what my sister and I did before we went to sleep. We all look at the big plastic glow in the dark star at the center of the girls' ceiling and say: "Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight."

"Make a wish," Emma says. I suspect her wish will be that Mommy and Daddy stop fighting.

Then we pause for our wish. Tonight my wish is simple.

I just wish my wife understood how hard it is to be me.

I head back to the bedroom and Amanda goes to the nursery to put Sammi to bed. There is pure ice between the two of us and I think about packing a bag and meeting Jenna downtown.

My phone is on the bedside table, but after seeing the look on Emma's face, I know I can't do it. Leaving the house and getting a room with Jenna is not a step I'm ready to take. Instead, I decide to sleep on it. There's no point in continuing. It takes about ten minutes for me to fall into another dream about Jenna.

The combination of a screaming baby and glaring bright lights rips me from my sleep. "What the hell?" I'm shocked at the disturbance of my peace. My eyes are incapable of seeing clearly. The whole room is a fuzzy mess, like an out of focus photograph.

I hear my voice from across the room, "What happened to me?"

"What are you talking about?" I ask, but it's not my voice that fills the air, it's the soft feminine voice of my wife. "Amanda where are you? What's wrong with my voice? Do you hear that?"

"I hear you. Something is terribly wrong. I have to get Sammi."

Get the baby. Who cares about the stupid baby? I can't see. My body feels different. Hell, I'm wearing clothes. There is no way for me to wrap my head around what's happening here.

Before I know it the fuzzy, large, and naked figure who is talking in my voice is handing the crying baby to me. I put the bottle in her mouth to make her shut up. I can't use my newly awakened brain in this chaos.

"I don't know what is going on," my voice wails. "Who are you?"

"It's me. It's Chris," I say, but no matter how hard I try to control it, I'm still talking in my wife's voice. "Who are you?" I squint at the figure. I'm starting to put together the pieces and see who it is.

"It's Amanda," I hear my voice say. At first, I don't believe it, but then I see the shape scamper awkwardly over to the dresser and pull out a pair of shorts to cover its naked body. This is totally Amanda, she hates to be naked. "We...we...we switched bodies?"

Huh? What the hell? I need to figure out a way to see what the hell is going on here.

"This can't be happening. Th...th...this is not possible."

If we did switch bodies, then Amanda should know how to make me see. "I can't see," I say pleadingly.

She comes in my direction and sits a pair of glasses on my nose. Everything comes into focus hard and fast.

I see myself standing in front of me crying hysterically. I look down and am able to clearly recognize Amanda's body covered in her favorite flannel pajamas. Moving out of bed, I go towards my body and reach out, but my body pulls back as if I'm trying to hurt it.

My mind is completely blown by what's happening and I can't believe she's still holding a grudge from last night. "Come on, Amanda," I say. "I know you're mad, but you're going to have to put that aside right now. Something bizarre is happening to us."

There is a pause, so I use it to grab at her hand and walk her over to the mirror. When we get there I can't believe what I'm

seeing. It's Chris, and Amanda and little Sammi, but something is definitely not right about it. We've switched bodies.

I move the baby to my shoulder for a burp. I have to take care of Sammi so I can take care of Amanda. I think the baby's a little upset that her daddy keeps breaking down and crying, so it feels nice to be giving her comfort.

"How did this happen?" Amanda says in my voice. "This is not possible."

"I don't know how it happened, but I think you got the short end of the deal." I try to inject humor into the moment. Better to laugh than cry, right? It's a good thing that all of my years as a man have taught me that when things start to get tough, it's my job to hold it together and figure out how to fix the problem.

The whole situation reminds me of the chaos in my house when I was growing up. My mom and dad fought often and about mostly everything. He would go through the roller coaster ride of being bipolar. We'd be having a great time then suddenly, the whole world would change. Not as drastic as this, but it still reminds me of that.

"How can you joke?" She pivots so she's facing me. "This is supernatural."

My face falls, the smile washed away by her stern reaction. "Sorry, I thought I'd try to make you feel better."

She makes my face soften. "No, I'm sorry...I just...I just...I mean...this can't be happening? Can it?" She turns back toward the mirror and smacks and pinches my face. Just watching her do it hurts me a little.

"It can't," I say with absolute, unquestioning conviction. "It absolutely can't happen. But"—I switch my tone to that of wonder—"it seems as though it has." I switch gears. "I know this is weird, but we need to talk through it. We need to figure out what happened and what we're going to do."

My attempts to calm her are not working. She's a mess. I appeal to her maternal instincts. "Em and Mads are going to wake up in an hour, two at the most. We need to come up with a plan so they aren't freaked."

"I know." Amanda lets out a quiet sob while looking at me. It's weird to see your face and know that it's not you, to see it react, but know you aren't controlling it. I'm creeped out right now, but I'm also intrigued. This situation is impossible. Things like this only happen in the movies, but here we are, real people with

real lives living in each other's bodies. I don't know what I want to do, however, a little part of me thinks this is cool.

"What should we do?"

"We have to protect the kids. We need to pretend to be each other. We need to do the same stuff we usually do, but as each other."

"I'm not sure I can do that." Amanda is shaking. "I'm really scared and I don't think I can act like a man."

"You'll be great." I'm not entirely sure I mean it. My wife is not masculine. She's the type of girl who loves being a woman and basks in the specifics of it. "Here's a chance to see what it's like to be me. It could be really good for us."

I don't know where all of this optimism is coming from, I just know that we need to try to see the positives in this fucked up situation.

"You know, it's weird you say it like that." She's sniffling. "Last night when we made our wishes, I wished that you knew what it was like to be me. I mean, it was just me being frustrated. It didn't really mean anything, but it's strange that this has happened."

"Oh my God." I feel the color drain from my—er, Amanda's face. "*I* wished *you* knew how hard it was to be me."

Is this how it happened? I mean, did we wish this on each other? I think about how things like this happen in the movies. A fortune cookie...a gypsy machine...a coin in a fountain.... In the movies, there is magic, but how it happens isn't important. It's all just a plot device for the characters to learn a lesson. Is there really magic in the universe? If there is, we need to figure out how it works to get out of this situation.

"Do you think this happened because we wished those things? I mean, it's literally impossible that you can wish to be someone else and have this happen, but here we are. It's happened."

"I don't know, but you're right, we need to get our act together before the kids get up."

"Well, what would you be doing right now?" Invoking our parental responsibility helps me find strength. "Tell me what I need to do this morning. If we can get through a few hours, maybe we can talk my mom or Roxy into taking the girls for the afternoon and we can go somewhere and make a plan."

"Okay...okay." She's thinking now. The tears have stopped and she's more focused. "I guess I'd take the baby downstairs and

make coffee. You usually sleep in and don't even wake up until Emma and Mady start moving around, but I don't want to sleep, so, let's just both go downstairs."

"Sounds good, babe." There are still obvious signs of fear lingering on my face. I lean over and give her a big hug. "We're going to get through this. We'll figure this out and we'll be okay." I say these things to make her feel better, but I'm not sure I completely believe them.

Chapter 14

Amanda as Chris

The first thing I do when I walk into the kitchen is start the coffee. The kitchen is my favorite room in the house. It feels like home in here. We have a big open space that looks into the family room. I picked out all the cabinets and finishes when we first bought the house. It's not terribly fancy, but it's bright and cheerful. I chose the white cabinets and creamy tile countertop so there would always be light. The kitchen reflects my tastes and aesthetics. I want to create happy memories of the girls doing homework at the breakfast table and family meals at the holidays. Being here, in my domain, makes me feel a tiny bit more normal – which helps still my trembling man-fingers as I fight my way into the morning routine.

While I'm working on the coffee, my gaze drops to my hands and I'm taken aback at the enormous hairy mitts fumbling with

the supplies. It feels odd to have no hair to stick behind my ears, but loads of it on the rest of my body. My head is cold.

The ache in my shoulder is constant and distracting. This is the legacy of an old high school basketball injury. Chris has told me the story of how he went up for a layup and got crushed by two giants on the opposing team, but I didn't realize how much it would still hurt. I don't know how he copes with this pain every day. I've always kind of thought he was just acting out for attention, but this totally sucks.

I finish setting up the coffee and push the button to begin the brewing process. While I'm waiting to get the first cup, I look over and see him in the family room with the baby. *That should be me.* I take care of the baby every morning. A wave of jealousy hits me as I see that she is totally fixated on Chris. My heart aches a little. Not only do I miss holding the baby, but I also realize just how cut off from the kids Chris is.

This is the natural consequence of our arrangement. He goes to work and I stay at home. But, there's more to it because when he does try to take care of the kids, I shoo him away. When this first started, it wasn't on purpose, but as we added kids, I didn't want him coming in and messing things up. Now, I'll have to live with the repercussions of that choice. Sammi doesn't want her father because she has never really needed him. Which, in our current situation, means Sammi doesn't want me.

I've been in his body for about an hour and I'm getting used to his movements. I still don't like it, but it isn't as jarring. It kind of reminds me of being pregnant. The awkwardness of the last few months of gestation when you can't move without knocking things over, the feeling that your body isn't the same body you've always known. It gives me comfort to think of this like being pregnant. I liked being pregnant, not all of it, but I definitely enjoyed parts – like the freedom to act differently. This could be another opportunity for that, I guess.

The machine beeps to indicate the coffee has finished brewing, I head to the living room and hand a cup to Chris. He accepts the steaming mug while protecting the baby who is sleeping in his arms. There is a small bit of comfort in seeing my body hold my baby. I smile at him. I think it's the first time I've smiled since this happened.

"What are we going to do?" It feels like a question that has no possible answer.

"We'll just keep moving." He takes a gulp of the coffee and winces when it burns his mouth. "We don't really have a choice."

"I don't know if I can do this. I don't know if I can pretend to be you because I don't even like you right now. After our fight last night, I want to run away from you, but here I am stuck in your body. It's not fair."

"You're not exactly my favorite person right now, either." He's changed the tone of my voice. He's no longer trying to console me, he's annoyed. *God, is that really how I sound when I'm annoyed?* "I just don't see what choice we have. You'll just have to figure out a way to make it work. You can hate me and tell me how horrible I am if we ever figure this out. In the meantime, we need to make the situation work for the kids."

"I don't hate you. I just don't know how to talk to you anymore."

"Well, you're going to have to work on it, because if we can't talk to each other, we're all screwed."

He's right.

"Look," he says, emitting a resigned sigh, "I think we'll be okay, so long as we can get through the morning. I know you do a lot. Why don't you give me a run down?"

He's right I have to stay focused on the task at hand. All the other stuff will just have to wait. "Okay. Emma and Mady will come down first. They'll both want to cuddle a little bit. I'll take Sammi while you watch a little TV with them. After that, you'll need to ask them what they want for breakfast and make it." Saying all this to Chris is helping me find my bearings. We don't have control over what happened to us, but it feels good to make a plan. "After breakfast, they can watch some more television. You may need to pull them away one by one to get them dressed. Mady's into picking out her own clothes now. Don't fight her. The parenting blogs say it's good to let her express herself, besides, she can't do much worse than you would." Shit. Now he's going to be offended, just when we were making progress.

Instead, he smiles.

"Yeah, sometimes I'm pretty bad at the fashion thing. The girls are lucky you do the shopping."

I smile at the unexpected compliment. He's being kind. I'm going to need to follow his lead on this and not give in to the resentment I started to unleash last night. If Emma wouldn't have

come in when she did, I'm pretty sure I would have asked for a divorce.

"You should call Roxy after breakfast and see what she's doing this afternoon. Normally, you work all Saturday morning, but I don't want to go sit alone in your office, so I'll stick around and try to help out."

"Oh shit, that reminds me."

I know what's coming before he has a chance to say it. I mentioned work and now he feels compelled to do it.

"I have an email coming in from one of my students. She was sending me questions about her research and I told her I'd send her comments by noon today. I'm going to have to check email."

"You can't do that." My tone is sharper than I meant for it to be. I try to back pedal. "I hardly ever do email, especially not on the weekends. The girls won't like it if they think I'm on email. Besides, isn't this"—I motion frantically to the two of us—"more important than an email from some girl?"

"Look, I know work is a dirty word to you, but we're going to have to figure out a way to make this happen, any thoughts?"

I'm annoyed, but I know he's right. We can't just forgo our responsibilities while we try to come up with a plan. If we let on to anyone what's happening, I'm pretty sure they'd have us both committed. "Okay, how about this. Take the laptop and go upstairs. I'll tell the girls we're going to let you sleep in. Do your email as quickly as you can and then get down here. No more work today. At all. Period. I need you to focus on how we're going to fix this. Deal?"

"Deal." Chris hands me the baby and he takes off up the stairs. No sooner does the door to our room shut than I hear movement in the girls' room. They're coming downstairs. It's show time.

Chapter 15

Chris as Amanda

The door is barely shut when I hear the girls moving around. I need to get my work done quickly and head downstairs to help. Amanda needs me to do this, but I'm scared at the idea of the girls looking at me as their mommy. My wife and the girls have a close relationship. They're all really tight.

I love my kids, but for the last six years I've been more than happy to let Amanda be the primary care giver and just play a supporting role. She feeds them, dresses them, helps them with projects, and plays games with them. She watches movies with them, drives them to play dates, kisses their ouchies, and puts them to bed. When I start to think about all the stuff Amanda does for the girls I'm overwhelmed and scared. It's not just the quantity of the things she does that gets me, it's also the quality. I may have problems with the way Amanda treats me, but she is an extraordi-

narily good mother and I don't think I'll be able to fool them. They know her intimately, possibly even better than I know her.

"Focus, Chris," I mutter to myself. I need to get this done so I can go downstairs and be there for Amanda. I'm afraid she's going to crack under the pressure and I know she needs me.

I log on. Seventy-two new messages. Great. I really do get too much email. I scan the subject lines, most are junk. A few can wait until I have more time, it looks like I'm only going to have to respond to two right now. The one from the Vice President of Student Affairs asks me to attach a budget proposal for the Communication Club. I have a copy of this on the laptop. The document is pretty good, so I just update a few figures, attach it, and send it off.

The second email is from Jenna. I'm afraid of what it'll say when I open it. After the visit in my office yesterday (was that only yesterday, because it feels like a lifetime ago?) and the texts we've been exchanging, it could be really suggestive. I was completely on board with this when I went to bed a few hours ago, but now, the tryst in my office seems like the worst decision I've ever made. I'm relieved to see that the email isn't that bad. She's sent me more explicit emails in the past.

My rule is to move her emails to a special folder named "student recommendations" as soon as I get them so they aren't apparent in my inbox. I've always been very careful about what I write back to her. I've been afraid she may go to my chair and claim sexual harassment if I hurt her feelings and I want to make sure there is a paper trail that shows this is mutual and she's been pursuing me.

The email she sent yesterday just says:

"I've attached my paper for your comments. I had a very good time yesterday. Productive meeting J. Let me know when we can get together to discuss grad school again. – J."

I know I have to look at her paper and give her some feedback. I'm afraid if I blow her off, she'll call my cell phone, or worse the home phone. I don't want to give her a reason to call me, especially now.

It takes about twenty minutes and the feedback isn't as detailed as I would usually provide, but I think it'll keep her off my back until I see her at the study session tomorrow night. Oh shit, I forgot about the study session. I'm not going to be able to do this.

I look like my wife. My initial reaction is to send out an email canceling, but I know my students will act up if don't do the review. Besides we may switch back tonight. I don't know how long this is going to last. I decide to not do anything yet. For now, my focus has to be on getting downstairs and acting like a mommy.

"Where are my little jelly bellies?" I sing as I walk down the stairs. This is what I've seen Amanda do when she enters a room she knows the girls are in. I'm proud of myself for knowing my wife this well. It seems to work because the girls come running to me.

"Mommy! Mommy! Daddy made breakfast...and it's good." Emma sounds both happy and surprised. I'm a little offended that's she's so shocked this could happen, but I guess I don't really cook much for them.

"Yep, it's good," Mady echoes.

"Come have some." Emma dances grabs at my hand and enthusiastically pulls me forward. "Daddy made some for you, too. He said you needed to sleep in today, so we let you sleep in. And later we'll get a cookie."

Okay, here we go. Please God, don't let me mess this up. "Daddy is silly, I didn't need to sleep in, but it makes me happy that you let me and that we get to eat cookies later. Now, I'm up and ready to play." I lean over and kiss Mady on the cheek. She giggles. I smile. That's my girl. I can do this.

Nothing could prepare me for what I see when I walk into the kitchen. My body is sitting at the end of the table wearing a pink and purple apron that says, "Kitchen Princess." My legs are crossed at the knee and I'm sipping coffee like I went to finishing school. It's my body, but it definitely is not me. This won't work. She is way too feminine for this. I'm mortified.

"Aman...oh..uh...Chris, can I see you in the kitchen for a second?" Thank God the only people we have to fool right now are the kids. We're terrible at this.

"Sure thing, babe." It's like she's not even trying to act like me. "We'll be right back girls." I watch her as she prances my body into the kitchen.

"What are you doing? I look like a cartoon princess in that getup."

"Oh, yeah...I made the girls eggs for breakfast and I didn't want to get splattered. Don't worry about it. I find it hard to be-

lieve that a six foot five inch, two-hundred and fifty-pound bald man could ever look like a princess. Don't be so insecure."

"I am insecure. I don't know what the hell I'm doing, but I do know that I'm doing my best to act like I think you would act and I wish you'd do the same."

"Okay, you're right." She takes off the apron, pulls her chin back and sticks her chest out. "I'm going to be soooooo manly. Manlier than you ever were." She drops my voice an octave and slams her fist into her palm for emphasis.

Her terrible impression brings a smile to my face. I expected her to argue with me, but she didn't. For the first time in a long time, I feel like we're on the same team. We used to always be on the same team. That was one of the things that really set her apart from other girls I dated. From our first date I felt like she had my back. It wasn't anything overt, just the way she laughed at my jokes and asked me questions about my family. She seemed interested. She was an ally. This was the nature of our relationship for years.

It didn't really change much until I started working at the university and she decided to stay home with Emma. It was subtle, but I began to feel like we were opponents, always looking to outscore each other. All of this made it so we couldn't talk to each other anymore. It's nice to feel this closeness again, even if it is under these crazy circumstances. Remembering the way we were makes me feel instantly close to her again. I have the sudden urge to reach out and kiss her, but she's already gone back to the table for breakfast with the kids.

Chapter 16

Amanda as Chris

After breakfast, Chris calls Roxy. She has plans and can't help. I know I have to call Chris's mom, but I really don't want to. I dread calling her. She really wanted us to have kids and before we had the girls, she said she'd be available to help us with them. I even thought I'd still be able to work, at least part-time, while she babysat. So much for that. She helps us watch them, but not nearly as often as I thought she would and not without her pound of flesh.

I know life has been hard for her since her kidneys failed. There were some really tough times when she was on dialysis. We didn't find out about her sickness until I was three months pregnant with Emma and Chris just started at the university. I cut my hours at the newspaper and only worked part-time so I could help and after Emma was born, I left my job completely.

When Linda finally got a transplant, Emma was two and Mady was on the way. I sigh as I think about how different life may have been if Linda wouldn't have gotten sick.

There are days when I would do anything to be back in a newsroom. I loved being a reporter, going out into the world every day and talking to people. It was my dream since I was a little girl typing family stories on an old typewriter in my parents' basement. Now, it's hard for me to even imagine stepping foot into a newsroom again. My life has gone in a completely different direction.

I grab Chris's phone and call Linda. She picks up almost immediately. I make note of this because when I call her from my phone, she usually lets it ring for a while, and sometimes, she doesn't even answer. "Hey, Linda."

"Linda, since when do you call me Linda?" *Shit.*

"Sorry. I mean Mom." I almost choke on the word when I say it. I just plow ahead with a nervous laugh. "Oops, my bad. What are you doing this afternoon?"

I'm expecting her to tell me how tired she is and how she just needs to take the day to rest, so I'm super surprised when she says, "Nothing, honey. What do you need?"

Is it always this simple for him? I thought I'd be able to talk her into it if I promised to go to the grocery store or something. I never dreamed she would give me a flat out, "yes." That never happens. Why don't I have Chris call her all the time?

"I just need you to watch the girls for a few hours this afternoon. I know how tired you get, but I *really* need you today. Do you think you could come over?"

"Don't be silly. I'm fine. You know I love to help you." That's not the story I get when I ask for something. She *always* goes out her way to tell me how tired she feels. "Is it Amanda, honey? Is she fighting with you again? That girl doesn't appreciate you. She doesn't know how lucky she is to have a good, hard-working man to take care of her."

Wow, I really don't know what to say to that. I don't want to piss her off because I really need her to watch the kids, but clearly she talks shit about me to my husband. And, even more disturbing, my husband confides in my mother-in-law that we fight, a lot.

I decide the situation is too dire and I need her help too much to address this now. Still, I make a mental note to talk to Chris

about this. And I plan to make her pay for her own groceries next time.

"No, Amanda is great. She's an *amazing* wife." I exaggerate the word "amazing" for maximum effect. *Take that, Linda.* "As a matter of fact, she's such a good wife, I wanted to take her out for the afternoon."

"Well, okay. If you're sure."

"I'm sure."

"Can you come and pick me up sweetheart? My car isn't working exactly right lately. I told Amanda about it, but she doesn't really seem to want to help me get it fixed. But that's okay. It must be hard staying home all day long." She takes another shot at me. I do know she's been complaining about her car, but I haven't had a chance to take it up to the garage and wait with the kids, while the mechanic looks at it.

I can't believe she's saying all of this. I literally bite my tongue. I've used the expression before, but I never knew there would be an actual occasion where I would have to do it.

"I'll pick you up. How about 12:30?" I say 12:30 because I know I have to say 12:30 if I want her to be ready by one o'clock. She loves to make people wait. It's her favorite manipulation.

"Okay, sweetheart. I'll see you then."

"Bye, Mom." My voice is sharp and about to betray me, so I hang up quickly. I have never been so happy to get off the phone. I've had a bad morning and this is almost more than I can take. I've always had the feeling that Linda resents me, but I never realized how bad it is. I feel betrayed. I spend a lot of time doing things to help her and this is the thanks I get. I'm not sure I'm ever going to be able to get over this.

I go into the family room and find Chris sitting on the floor playing with the girls. He's still in my pajamas and robe. It's weird to see myself sitting on the floor playing with my kids, almost like I'm watching a home movie.

I don't know how Chris is holding it together, but he seems to be having a good time with the girls. He's always been better at stressful situations than I am. I suddenly feel a wave of affection for him. I'm glad I'm not in this alone. Instead, it reminds me that Chris and I have been through a lot together. It gives me hope. So long as we are a team, we'll figure out a way to fix everything.

I walk over to Chris, "You know, you're mom doesn't really like me." I keep my voice low so the kids won't hear me shit-talking their grandma.

"She's just jealous." He's busy dressing his doll in a pink and black roller skating outfit. "She wants me and the girls all to herself, and it drives her crazy that when she needs something, I call you and you're always the one who helps her out. She should be thankful, but she wants me to be the one who runs her errands. She may be bitter, but my family really needs you and she knows it. It's my fault."

"Why haven't you said this to me before? You know how upset I get about the way she treats me."

"I guess I thought if I ignored it, it would get better." He nonchalantly holds the doll in the air and inspects his work. "I was wrong."

It's nice to hear him be so frank with me. He's not being defensive or protective of his mom. He's just being honest and taking part of the blame for himself. Maybe this change isn't so bad after all.

"Well, I need to go pick her up in an hour. Any advice?"

"Yeah, just agree with her. I couldn't tell you half of what she says to me, I just keep saying 'yes, Mom,' and most of the time that works." He looks at me and smiles reassuringly.

I'm starting to see that Linda and I may want the same thing. It seems like we are both just trying to get Chris to spend more time with us and less time at his job. Maybe if he listened to his mom when he saw her, she'd be happier about the time they spend together. I think about saying this to him, but it's not the time. Instead I say, "Sounds good," and give him a kiss on the forehead. It's just a little reward for not defending his mom's bad behavior. He looks both shocked and pleased.

It felt good to give him some affection, but the sudden intimacy makes me feel uncomfortable, so I change the subject. "We need to get dressed."

"Yeah?" Chris looks skeptically at my pajamas. "What do you have in mind?"

"I don't know, a dress? A pair of pantyhose? Tell me your weirdest fantasies." I smile.

"I'd be happy to." Even with all that's happened, he doesn't miss an opportunity for a sexual innuendo.

"Shut up." It feels strange to flirt with myself.
"Shut up is a bad word." *Saved by the Emma.*
"It's a bad word," says Mady, nodding her head gravely.
"Gah, gah," says Sammi.
Chris grabs the baby and we all head upstairs.

Chapter 17

Chris as Amanda

Getting dressed is pretty easy. Amanda picks out clothes for me to wear. I end up in a pair of black corduroys and a light gray turtleneck sweater. Her boobs look great. The shoes are a little trickier. She decides I'm not ready for anything with a heel, so that rules out most of the options. She settles on a pair of mid-calf boots with only a small heel. I take a practice spin around the room and we both decide I don't look too bad walking in them.

Then, she raids my closet and picks out the outfit she would have me wear if she got to pick out my clothes. I must admit, my body is pretty well dressed when she's in charge. She chooses a pair of old button-fly Levis that I haven't worn since college (I'm honestly surprised and a little impressed that they still fit) and she pairs this with a long sleeve graphic tee-shirt she bought me last Christmas.

When we're dressed, we find the girls in their room and she pulls clothes out the drawers while I distract them. I get them dressed without much incident while Amanda takes Sammi to the nursery.

Mady only makes a few small demands. She insists on wearing an orange paisley head scarf she pulled out of Amanda's drawer and she refuses to discard her sister's leopard print robe. Amanda claims that this is a good day when dressing Mady and I feel like we're actually making this work. It's nice to be on the same team as my wife.

When we get back downstairs, it's time for Amanda to pick up my mom. We're running behind and Amanda informs me that I'm going to have to feed the kids' lunch. Lucky for them, she also informs me that she has some of those premade lunch trays from the deli. All I have to do to feed Emma and Mady is rip the plastic. I throw some Cheerios on the high chair tray and Sammi digs in. Not bad. I open the pantry having decided that since I've managed to dress and feed my children, I am capable of finding myself something to eat.

Not much in the pantry, but the freezer is full of goodies. I grab a large, frozen, meat lover's pizza, and put it in the stove. Twenty-minutes and I'm golden.

Amanda comes into the kitchen to say good-bye. She goes over to the girls and gives each one a kiss on the forehead. They smile up at her and jabber away as she does this.

I can't help but feel close to her. It's the same kind of closeness I felt when my mom got sick, when Emma, Mady, and Sammi were born, and when her dad died—like things are really challenging right now, but if we stick together, we'll be okay. Family crises have always brought out the best version us.

She grabs her keys and comes into the kitchen to say goodbye. She opens her mouth as if to say something, but then draws in a breath that she holds until its blows forward as a sigh. She gives me a strange look.

"What is it?" I try to sound reassuring so she'll be open with me.

"It's just, I feel like I should kiss you goodbye, but I just can't bring myself to kiss my own face."

It's weird, but I know we both need this right now. I get up on my tiptoes and plant one on my face. It's definitely strange,

but also familiar, even though we've swapped bodies, we're still Amanda and Chris.

When I pull away, I see my face, but I feel her there. I know it was the right thing to do.

"Thank you," Amanda whispers as she walks out the door.

No sooner does the door shut than I hear distress at the table.

I run over to the table and see Mady eating her food. She looks like she doesn't have a care in the world. Emma on the other hand is red faced and crying loudly. She's holding her left shoulder. "What's going on?" Even though she's upset and crying, I still I look to Emma for answers. "Why are you crying?"

"MADY BIT ME!" Emma sobs fill the entire house.

Mady is a biter. Ever since she grew some teeth, she's been using them to cause serious damage. We thought we'd be done with it by now, and for the most part we are, but she still likes to bite Emma. This is good because she doesn't bite many people, but it's bad for poor Emma.

One night a few months ago, Amanda was out late at the store buying something Emma needed and I was home alone with the girls. I had Emma and Mady in the tub. I left them alone for a few minutes to run to our room to see some scores on the ESPN crawler. I was just gone for a few minutes when I heard a gut-wrenching scream coming from the bathroom. I ran in and found Mady sitting in the tub with Emma's little toe in her mouth. It took me almost a minute to get Mady to release her jaws. I had to bribe her with ice cream.

When it was over, I was terrified Mady would spit out the little toe, but it didn't get quite that far. The bite did, however, break the skin around the entire circumference of the toe and the blood had turned the bathwater pink. Emma had trouble wearing shoes for at least a week. I know the biting is a problem and I need to deal with it harshly.

"Madison Elizabeth Claridge!" I bellow. Amanda's voice really doesn't have the same impact as mine does. "You are not allowed to bite. You're in big trouble." Shit, I don't know what big trouble is. Amanda handles this stuff. I turn to my only reliable source of information. "What should I do?"

"TIME OUT!" Emma yells at me through her tears.

"Good. Yes. Time out, Mady." I nod my head for emphasis.

I don't know how to do a time out. I've witnessed Amanda do this over and over again, but I've never really paid close atten-

tion to the details. This whole switch highlights how little I know about the way our house runs. "You go sit in the living room and don't come out until I tell you it's okay." I impress myself with the force of my punishment. I'm not so bad at this.

Mady doesn't even fight as she goes into the living room. I go over and comfort Emma. This bite isn't that bad, mild bruising on her shoulder, no missing digits.

The timer goes off and I go into the kitchen and get my pizza out of the oven. It looks so good. I'm starving. I get the hot sauce out of the fridge and load it up. I take the pizza to the table and sit down with Emma and Sammi and start eating. I'm just finishing the last piece when Amanda walks in, my mom by her side.

"Hey, Amanda," she emphasizes the use of her name and gives me a conspiratorial wink. "How was lu..." She stops dead midsentence and her mouth drops open. She looks down at my plate and then up at my face. She glares at me. "Did you eat that whole pizza?" She asks through clenched teeth.

"Yeah." I don't understand why she's suddenly upset. If she wants some pizza, there are three more in the freezer. She bought them and put them there. Then it hits me. I need to play my role. I get up and run over to her, "I can make you one, honey, if you like?" I'm proud of myself for acting so wifely, especially in front of my mom. We can totally do this.

"You ate an entire pizza?" She keeps going. She's not responding to my advances, instead she's staring wild-eyed at the empty plate. "Do you know how many calories are in an entire pepperoni pizza?"

Oh, now I get it.

"Yes, Amanda," my mom chimes in, looking at me with both disgust and smug satisfaction. "An entire pizza seems a bit much. After all, you still need to lose some of that extra weight you put on when you were pregnant with Sammi."

This is bad. This is really bad. I don't think I've ever made my face look so angry in the thirty-eight years I've been controlling it. She looks like she's going to kill me. She pulls herself together (barely) and says, "I'm sorry honey, you look great, I'm a total asshole." She glares at my mom behind her back.

"Sweet boy, you are not an asshole, it's a perfectly natural reaction." *Why can't my mom just keep her mouth shut for once?*

"Asshole is a bad word." My best ally has turned against me.

"Shut up, Mom," Amanda says without missing a beat.

"Shut up is a bad word, too," Emma says.

I pat Emma on the top of her head. "You're right, sweetheart. The grownups need to be nice to each other and not use bad words." I say it, but I have no idea how to make it happen.

Amanda still looks mad when she asks, "Where's Mady?"

Where is Mady? She was here, then she bit Emma, then, oh yeah, "She's in the living room," I say. "I had to put her in time out."

"She bit me," Emma pulls at the shoulder of her shirt to show the teeth marks that are proof of the assault. "It hurts."

Amanda goes into the living room and all I hear is, "What the...? Madison Elizabeth Claridge." Uh oh.

Amanda walks back to the table carrying Mady who is covered in marker. No wonder she wasn't upset about being put in timeout. She was playing in the marker box and now she's covered. Her forehead is black, her left cheek is red, the right one is green, and she's drawn a large orange circle around her mouth. "I color my face," Mady says. "I look pretty, Daddy?"

There are no words. I know I'm in big trouble. I have screwed up. I know nothing about my wife and kids. I just want to crawl under the table and cry. Then I look at Amanda and see my face break into a goofy smile. I hear my big booming laugh. Amanda is laughing so hard she's shaking. The laughter is contagious. Sammi laughs, Emma laughs, Mady laughs, even my mom laughs. When the rest of the room is laughing, I feel like I have permission to forgive myself. I laugh too, and it feels good.

Chapter 18

Amanda as Chris

I'm standing there holding Mady and I look at the horrified expression on my face. He has really screwed this up and he knows it. I have to make a choice. I can let him have it and make him feel worse, or I can give him a break.

I look at Mady's face, which is completely covered in marker. She looks like some kind of demented clown. I see the absurdity in all of this, and it breaks away the anger. The whole situation is funny and instead of fighting it and holding on to the anger, I decide to go with it. I let out a laugh and it feels good. The laughter spreads and soon everyone is joining in. I look at my face and see Chris mouth, "thank you." In that moment, I feel like a hero.

It's strange that it takes this kind of messed up situation to bring out my good side, but now that I've found it, I'm starting to feel relief. It's been a long time since I've been able to set aside

my fear of letting things get out of control. It takes this absolutely unbelievable situation to force me to do it.

I'm in my house, with my family, but everything is out of sorts. First off, my mother-in-law is being so nice to me, it feels like someone else is in *her* body. I've seen her fawn over Chris in the past, but now that I'm in charge of his actions, I'm not being particularly nice to her. In fact, the worse I am, the nicer she is. They have a dysfunctional relationship.

And, Chris has eaten at least 3,000 calories since he took over my body and it's barely lunchtime. I cringe at this thought. If I ever get back into that body I'm going to have so much work to do. Not to mention that my girls run to him and talk to him, and I'm just an afterthought.

I miss the attention, but part of me is beginning to realize that it feels good to be free from the constant touching. I love my kids, and I love to cuddle, but there are times when it feels like if they could crawl back up inside of my womb, they would. They are always so hungry for love and affection and I'm the main source of this. It's freeing to be able to put some of that on Chris for a change.

"Okay, Mom." I grab my jacket. "We're going to head out. I'll have my cell so if you need, just give me a call. We should be back in a few hours."

"Okay, sweetheart. Have fun." She stands up. I give her a questioning look, I'm not sure why.... Then...I see her face...coming toward mine.

Oh no!

I forgot Chris's mom kisses him on the mouth when she says goodbye. I am *not* a mouth kisser. In my family, we only hugged on special occasions. Any kisses shared were very dry and on the cheek only. I kiss Chris and the girls on the lips, but that's it. Linda almost manages to land her lips on mine, but I turn my face at the last minute. The kiss falls harmlessly on my cheek. Linda has a hurt expression on her face.

"I think I'm getting a cold." I give a little fake cough, trying to cover. She smiles. She'll take any answer that will validate her affection.

"Okay, have fun you two."

When we leave the house, we decide to walk. Ruby's Sports Bar is just a few blocks away. We used to go there a lot before we had kids and it's still our favorite place to hang out if we get a

chance. We like the friendly atmosphere and the staff still kind of knows us. It will feel good to go some place familiar now that things are so messed up and unfamiliar. It's also nice to be walking outside in the crisp October air.

"So," I say.

"So," he replies.

"This is weird, right?"

"Sure is."

We walk a block in silence each of us trying to figure out what to say.

"I mean, this can't be happening. I keep thinking this can't really be happening, it must be a dream, but then I look in the mirror and I look just like you and you look just like me, but I'm not you."

"I know what you're saying, and it's weird and crazy, but I also think it's kind of fucking amazing. This is stuff that movies are made about. It's not a real possibility." I see my hair blow into his face. He looks happy and a little excited.

We reach the bar and walk inside. I'm not sure what to think. We walk over to a high-top table and sit down.

A waiter comes over. "Hi, welcome to Ruby's, I'm Derrick, I'll be serving you this afternoon. Can I get you a drink?"

"I'll have a white wine spritzer." It's my usual. Chris orders a pint and a shot of whiskey.

Derrick laughs at us. We both look at him with puzzled looks. "Oh, you're serious." His expression changes to one of acceptance and respect. "Good for you."

He walks away before it hits me. It must look ridiculous for a very large man to order a white wine spritzer. Oh, and to see me order a pint and a shot. This is another gender bender. Switching bodies is hard. Making decisions you think someone else would make is even harder.

"So," I say, trying to get the conversation back on track, "You think this is a good thing?"

"Well, not good per se, but definitely interesting. I mean, this does NOT happen. It's not logical. No one gets this opportunity. Aren't you at all curious about how it happened or what will happen next? I mean this defies the Laws of the Universe." He leans in and whispers as he says the last part.

I play along and lean in toward him. "I'm not sure I do care." After delivering this line, I lean back into my chair. "I'm really

confused by this whole thing. I guess what you're saying is right, but when you can't count on the Laws of the Universe, it kind of makes you wonder what else could possibly happen. Maybe I'll wake up tomorrow morning and be in your mom's body." As I say it a shivers runs though me. I decide I need a different example. "Or Emma's or the baby's. It's just too unsettling. It freaks me out."

"Yeah, but we can't change what's happening right now. Hell, we may not even remember it. Maybe we're both in some sort of conscious dream state and this is not really happening. I don't know, but I do know that I am fascinated by the idea of living in your body. Maybe not forever, but for right now it is, without a doubt, the coolest thing that has ever happened to me. Well, aside from meeting you." He gives me one of his charming, crooked smiles. My face involuntarily turns down and to the side. I pucker my lips, just slightly. I'm having an involuntary flirtatious response to his grin. I didn't think the smile would work if it wasn't on his face, but it seems as though his charm has survived the swap.

"Why aren't you scared? We have kids and you have a career and this is so disruptive. I guess, I just don't understand how you can be so calm and interested when all I can think about is how to switch back."

"Do you think we can switch back?" His voice reveals his excitement at the thought. "Do you think we can control it and switch back and forth whenever we want to? God, that would be so cool." His inner comic-book-worshipping-fan-boy is doing the thinking.

"Chris, you're missing the point. I don't want to be you anymore. I want to be me." I'm starting to get really frustrated with him.

"No, no, you're right and I get it." He leans back and ratchets down his enthusiasm. "But, I just don't think it's all bad. I think I could learn a lot about what it's like to be you while we try to figure out a way to get things back to normal."

"I would love to get back to normal." Even as I say it, I know it's not true. Normal wasn't really working for us. We were royally screwing up our marriage. I change gears. "Why do you think this happened?"

"I don't know for sure, but I do have a theory. Wanna hear it?"

I do want to hear it, but we're interrupted when Derrick walks to the table carrying our drinks. "Okay, here we go, a pint and a shot of whiskey for the little lady, and a white wine spritzer for the gentleman. Do you guys want anything from the kitchen?" I remember the pizza and am terrified. "No," I say hurriedly, gently smacking Chris's hand away from the menu. "We're fine."

"Don't be silly Aman, um...Chris..." he says. "You didn't have anything for lunch." He turns to Derrick who is clearly on Chris's side after watching me smack his hand. "We'll have an order of the nachos and twelve hot garlic wings—oh yeah—and do you guys still have that fried dough, cinnamon, dessert thing?"

"Cinnamondo dippers? Sure thing," Derrick gives Chris a triumphant look and leaves the table.

"You have to stop it! I'm not kidding, I'm going to weigh 500-pounds if you don't lay off the food and beer." I'm irritated. "Isn't my ass fat enough already?"

"No, it's not, you're getting too skinny. I love your ass." He smiles and nods when he says this. "I've always loved your ass. Besides, I eat when I'm stressed and this is VERY stressful."

I can't win. I pick up the conversation where we left off. "So, what's your theory?"

"Huh?" He lets out a short burp and then grimaces as he chases the shot with a drink of the beer. "Oh, yeah, the theory." He wipes my forearm over my mouth. He's making me look like a barbarian.

"Here's a napkin." Even when I'm a man, I'm still in mommy mode.

"Oh, sorry. Anyway, I think it was the wish last night. We had to be on to something this morning. It's the only possible explanation."

"So, we need to wish we were back to ourselves?"

"Yeah. I'm not sure it will work, but I think it's a good place to start."

"I agree. This is our best bet."

I feel a full sensation in my bladder. I have to go to the bathroom. The white wine spritzer is going right through me. I think about walking back home to do this, but I can't risk a second attempt at a mouth kiss from my mother-in-law. I don't like to use public restrooms as a woman and I certainly don't want to do this as a man. I suppose I don't really have a choice. Even worse than

being out in public looking like a very tall, bald man is being a very tall, bald man who wets himself.

"Chris, I need to pee." It feels like a secret.

"You know where the bathrooms are." He's gulping the beer looking at the television situated above my head.

"Yes, I know where they are, but I'm not sure about the proper protocol in the men's room." My bladder feels like it's going to burst.

"Oh." He sits down the beer and thinks for a minute. "Yeah, uh, I guess the first thing to keep in mind is that it won't smell great."

I already don't like this.

"Second, if you have to pee, just use the urinal. If you go into the stall, everyone will think you're pooping. Oh, yeah, if you see someone in the stall, he's for sure pooping. Don't go near him. It can get pretty ugly in there. So, like I said, use the urinal. Just pull out my dick and aim it at the bar of soap looking thing at the bottom. When you're done, give it a good shake. And, if there is anyone else at the urinal, whatever you do, don't look at his penis. That is strictly prohibited and considered VERY bad men's room etiquette."

After hearing all that, I think about skipping the whole thing and risking that mother-in-law mouth kiss, but I'm afraid it's too late for that. Besides, if I can push a baby out of my vagina, I'm sure I can handle the awkwardness of a public men's room.

"Okay, thanks for the tips. I'm going to give this a try. Wish me luck."

"Good luck." He's distracted again by the television. That man could watch sports in the middle of a hurricane.

I roll into the bathroom and I cannot believe how gross it is. Ruby's is a nice place, but this is not nice at all. I've seen the inside of men's bathrooms before, but I've never had to use one. The smell is a mixture of institutional and human. There are only two bathroom stalls and three urinals. One of the stalls is occupied, as is one of the urinals.

I shiver at the thought of either option. I don't want to go into the stall, and more importantly, judging from what Chris told me, I don't want to be anywhere near the guy in the other stall. I also don't relish the idea of peeing in public. The man at the urinal looks at me. He's clearly put off by the fact that I'm standing there weighing my options. I have to make a move.

I really don't think I'll be able to touch Chris's penis in public with an audience. I'm not even sure how I'm going to do this in public at all. I've only had to pee one other time today and it was excruciatingly awkward even though it was at home in my own bathroom. I decide I can live with the shame and I go into the unoccupied stall and close the door. I pull down the top part of my pants and grab Chris's penis. If we do manage to change back I'm not sure I'll ever be able to touch it again.

"It'll be okay," I say to myself, "you can do this, just concentrate."

"Huh?" Much to my terror the question comes from the man in the next stall.

Shit. "Oh nothing," I reply. I was making progress, but that startled me and the pee crawled back up. I don't know if I can do this.

I go into my mind and think about streams of water and faucets, and finally, it's working! I'm doing it!

Immediately I feel relief. When I'm done I'm not sure what to do. Chris told me to shake it, but that seems unhygienic so I dab at the end with a little toilet paper instead. When I pull up the underwear, it still feels a little wet, but I don't have time to linger on this.

I pull my pants back around my waist and exit the stall. Just as I'm doing this I hear movement from the guy in the other stall.

Uh-oh. He's coming out.

I'm not sure I can look him in the face. Women don't go to the bathroom like this. We are very private when we have to poop. It's quick and tidy and because we don't have the equivalent of a urinal. You rarely know who's to blame.

I don't want to make eye contact with this guy, so I decide to try to get out of here as quickly as possible. I race over to the sink and turn on the water. Too late, he's out of the stall and heading my way. The smell is unbelievable. It's both rotten and sickly sweet. He should be ashamed of himself.

He catches my eye in the mirror and smiles. I smile back tentatively, trying to finish quickly. He's heading my way and I think he's going to stop to wash his hands, but to my horror he walks over to the door and leaves. He just took a dump and didn't wash his hands?!?! I don't think I've ever seen this happen. Even Emma and Mady learned how to wash their hands when they were potty trained. I swear to myself that I will never step foot in a men's

room again. I know I won't be able to unlearn the horrors I have seen today.

I finish washing my hands, dry them, and use a paper towel to cover my hand when I open the bathroom door. I try to shake off the trauma as I head back to the table.

Chapter 19

Chris as Amanda

Amanda is peeing.

Is it wrong that I find this very funny? She can be so tightly wound. She is going to freak out when she sees what happens inside a public men's room.

I focus my attention on the television hanging over the bar. It's on my favorite sports station. The anchor is talking about a football player who got arrested yesterday. Turns out the team is not going to fire him. It's unbelievable how much money these owners will throw at complete assholes.

"What a creep," I say to no one in particular.

"No shit," says the old guy sitting at the barstool closest to our high-top. "Pardon my French, little lady, but these assholes are ruining sports."

"He's a creep, but at $2.5 million a year where else are you going to find someone who will give you 85 catches and more than 1200 all-purpose yards a season. At least he's a talented asshole."

Amanda comes back over and sits down. She looks like she's just seen a murder. Ah, now I kinda feel bad for her.

"You okay?" I ask with genuine concern.

"I think I'll be all right." She takes a sip of her drink. "I don't know how you do that. It was awful."

"Yeah, I guess you're kind of seeing more than you bargained for." I smile. She smiles back. "You know, it's kind of cool to have this crazy secret. It reminds me of when you were pregnant with Emma. Do you remember?"

She nods delicately finishing the spritzer.

"We were so scared we would lose the baby, we didn't tell anyone you were pregnant for five months. It felt good to have a secret with you."

"I thought your mom was going to kill me when we finally told her. She might have if I wouldn't have been pregnant with your child. Her precious grandchild."

I laugh loudly, the alcohol has lowered my inhibition. It was so funny. My mom made this big deal about how a man who is going to be a father needs his mother more than ever.

"She really laid it on thick." Amanda scrunches up her face and nods her head to emphasize the point.

"She tried to talk me into letting her go to the sonogram appointments and when I wouldn't let her, she told me that we needed to name the baby Linda because it was a family tradition."

"I never knew that." Her surprised approval registers as a smile.

"Yeah, I was going to tell you, but my mom was so rough on you when she first got sick and I didn't want to make things worse. Then, when Emma was born, it didn't seem important anymore."

"I wish you'd told me." Amanda sounds genuine. "It would have been nice to know you were standing up for me. I thought you were pissed I wanted to wait so long to tell anyone."

"Are you kidding? I loved it. I thought it was so cool. Our little top secret mission. All the trips to the bar with our friends when you would order beers and I would drink them for you when no one was looking. It was great."

"You got so drunk." She laughs. "I thought we'd have to sign you up for a new liver."

"It was worth it."

God, those were happy times. Amanda was so carefree and happy. We both were.

Derrick arrives at the table with the food and I order another round of drinks. I pick up a nacho dripping with cheese and Amanda glares at me.

"Come on, Chris. I'm serious. I gain weight really easily," she says after Derrick leaves.

"Amanda, I know you are fixated on the fact that I'm going to make you fat, but have you thought about what this means for you?"

"What do you mean?" She's skeptical, but I have her attention.

"It means, my dear, you can eat all this stuff and not feel guilty. I have a great metabolism. Take advantage of that."

She doesn't seem convinced.

"Okay, let me put it another way, the only way to stop me from eating all of this is to eat it before I do."

Amanda sees the logic in my argument and digs in.

"Oh my God. I forgot how great bar food is." She smiles, her mouth stuffed full of nachos. "This is heaven. I feel like I've been on a diet of fruits, veggies, and whole grains for years."

We stop talking and drown our problems in the food. When Derrick comes back, Amanda ditches the spritzers and orders an appletini (she's still drinking girly drinks, but at least she's moved on to vodka.)

After we've finished the food, it's time to get down to business. She's full and a little drunk, so I think my ideas will go over a lot better than they would have an hour ago.

"I think we need to just go with this. I know it'll be hard, but it's also the opportunity of a lifetime. It's like when Jane Goodall went to live with the chimps. It's a chance to totally immerse ourselves in each other's world. A chance to gain some perspective. It could be good for our marriage."

"You're right."

"And it'll give you an opportunity... wait, what did you say?"

"I said, 'you're right,' I think we need to just go with this. At first, I didn't want to, and I still want to try to follow through with

our plan to undo this, but in the meantime, we have to make the best of the situation and try to protect the girls."

I'm shocked. Amanda has been crying and freaking out all day. Now, she's ready to just go with it. The liquor must be working.

"We have to fill each other in on what's going on, you know, like daily reports and directions about how to act. Like I have to get groceries on Monday or we won't have anything healthy to eat."

"And I have a study session with my students tomorrow night. You'll have to run it." Jenna's image briefly sneaks into my brain. I push it aside for now. *One woman at a time. Whatever made me think I could handle two of them anyway?*

"I can do that." There is a look of competent determination on her face. This is the girl I married... well... it's the person I married. "Tonight, after the girls go to bed, we'll stay up, and talk about this stuff, and when we put the girls to sleep, we'll wish to be back to normal. If it so happens that we wake up tomorrow and everything is back to normal, then so be it, but in the meantime, I'll feel better if we have a plan."

I reach over and take her extremely large hand with my delicate manicured one. Even though it's an absurd situation, I can't help but feel like everything is going to be okay. It's just another adventure with Amanda and I feel closer to her than I have in years. Of course, I guess you don't get much closer than being inside someone else's skin.

We stay at Ruby's for a little longer. We spend the time talking about the early days when we moved into our first apartment together. We had almost no money. Amanda wasn't full time at the newspaper yet and she'd picked up a second job at a flower shop to help support us while I went to graduate school.

It's funny to hear Amanda's stories come out of my mouth and we're both still drinking which makes them even funnier. Talking about old times makes me remember who we used to be back in the days when we still really liked each other.

After about an hour, Amanda wants to leave because she has to pee again and doesn't want to use the men's room. She looks at me, serious and wide-eyed, when she says, "I just can't go back there, Chris." She's so cute.

When we get home, I tell my mom that I'm going to take her back to the apartment. It's obvious she's disappointed at the sug-

gestion of spending time with Amanda when Chris is right here, and so obviously, available.

She goes over to Amanda and really lays it on thick. "Why don't you take me? I was really hoping to talk to you about my car and some of the other stuff that I need to have fixed around the apartment."

"No, Mom," Amanda says. "I had a little too much to drink and I don't want to drive you."

Mom's not happy, but she doesn't push. She says her goodbye, and this time she manages to get her kiss on the lips. Amanda is too slow to maneuver my face out of the way. She has always teased me about kissing my mom on the lips this, and when I witness the absurdity of this ritual I see what she means. Maybe I've allowed my relationship with my mom to be a little too close. I haven't wanted to upset her, but maybe, if I made her treat me like a man with my own family, then our relationship would be more equal and I'd be able to enjoy spending time with her.

Mom walks over to me. She looks very unhappy. "I'm ready to go, Amanda."

I go over to Amanda and give her a big kiss. "I hope this helps you forget the molestation from my mom," I whisper in her ear.

"I'm afraid nothing can undo that," she whispers back with a smile.

I turn to my mom. "Okay, Linda, let's hit the road."

We drive for a few minutes in silence. "You know, honey," she says, "Chris seems to be acting strangely today. He used to act strangely before he got a virus, so I'm pretty sure that's what's going on. Plus, he has that nasty cough. I probably shouldn't have kissed him when I left, but, you know, he's my baby boy."

"I'm sure he's fine."

"I don't think it was the alcohol. I think he was getting sick."

"It's okay." *Jeesh. Give it a rest already.*

"No, Amanda, honey." Ugh. Stop talking. Amanda's right, the way she says "honey" is totally condescending. "I know my boy and clearly he's getting sick. Remember when he had that sinus infection last winter? I told you he needed to see the doctor and you ignored me and it got so bad he had to miss two days of work. You really should listen to me. I'm just trying to be helpful."

"Linda, I know he's acting strange, but he's fine. Besides, Chris is a grown man who is completely capable of taking care of his own health."

I just want her to be quiet for the ride home. I don't like seeing her treat my wife like this. I mean, I know that my mom complains about Amanda to me, but it's entirely different to witness her being so overbearing and mean to Amanda. I always thought she was just overreacting, but there really is a problem.

"Amanda, you don't need to be so rude. I swear, you are really just not grateful for all that my son does for you. Is it really too much for you to show some concern for his health? If you won't, I will. I'll call him when I get home. I'm sure he'll listen to me."

"Whatever, Linda. We're here." I pull up to the curb outside of her apartment door. She just sits there. I look at her. She looks at me.

"Okay, bye," I say trying to get her to move.

"Aren't you going to help me get out?"

She's unbelievable. "Do I usually help you get out?" I ask incredulously. The door to her apartment is less than fifteen feet away. There isn't even much of a step.

"Well, yes, especially when I've watched all three of your children for several hours. I'm very tired, Amanda. I don't know what's gotten into you today, but you are really acting nasty."

I'm not sure what to do. She never expects me to help her out of the car and into the apartment and she never complains to me about watching the kids. Instead, she tells me all about what a great time she has with them. This side of my mom's personality is really irritating.

I decide not to rock the boat right now. I get out of the car and help her get down. She's really milking this. Usually, when I drop her off, she pops right out and goes into her place with no problem. I'll have to be sure to tell Amanda about this. I walk my mom to the door and she goes inside and shuts it behind her. She doesn't even say good-bye.

Wow. It turns out mom can be a total bitch.

Chapter 20

Amanda as Chris

I hear the door close and Chris comes in. I'm in the dining room feeding the baby. The girls are happily eating turkey breast sandwiches with ranch dressing and grapes on the side.

"Mommy! Mommy!" They yell.

"Daddy made us dinner," Emma says proudly. "Daddy made us food two times today. TWO!"

"He did it two times," Mady chimes in.

I continue to feed the baby. Chris tries not to laugh.

"That's great girls." Chris uses this opportunity to pad his reputation. "You have the world's best daddy. He's very talented."

"He's talented," Mady says emphatically. She turns to Chris and asks, "Mommy, what's talented?"

He takes a minute to plan his answer. "It means your dad can do lots of cool stuff."

"Yes, and I'm talented, too." Mady proclaims, pushing her chest forward with pride.

The girls start chatting with each other. I take the opportunity to talk to Chris.

"How was it?" I can't wait to hear how it went with his mom.

"You are a saint and I am sorry." He seems to mean it. "My mom is a piece of work."

"That's one way to put it."

"You didn't tell me that she demands curb side assistance."

"Huh?"

"When I pulled up in front of her apartment, she waited there until I, in her eyes, you, helped her get out of the van. Normally, when I drop her off, she hops right out. What's up with that?"

"I don't know. She tells me she's tired a lot, so I try to help. I guess I got into the habit when she was sick and I've never moved past it." I feel like he's reprimanding me for helping his mom.

He sees I'm upset and grabs my hand. "Hey, Amanda, I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to criticize you. You're great with my mom and I could have never made it through all the problems without your help. I just don't want to see her take advantage of you. You deserve better."

I'm touched by what he's said. I guess I knew he needed my help, but it's been a long time since he's really acknowledged what I do. "Really?" I know I should leave it at that, but I want more.

"Yes," he replies. "Mom shouldn't be treating you like that. Your relationship with her needs to change."

"But, it's hard to figure out what went wrong. I used to love your mom. We would hang out and tell stories during her treatments. It was kind of fun. Now, she hates me and talks shit behind my back. It's not that I want to stop helping her, I just want to figure out how to get her to like me again."

"I'm to blame here. She wants to spend more time with me, but I always pawn her off on you because it's easier for me. Jackie does the same thing. We talk about it all the time."

If he has talked to his sister about this, why have they left me out? I don't want to be cut out of my family. "I'm fine with helping," I interject. "I've always been cool with helping you and your sister. I just didn't realize that it was creating problems."

"It really isn't your fault. At some point, when things are back to normal, I need to talk to my mom about this. You're getting dragged into our relationship and paying a price for our dysfunction. I'll fix it."

"Thanks, babe."

"She's not your babe," Mady says. "She's MY mommy. And she's Emma's mommy and she's Sammi's mommy. She's not a babe." At the end of her statement, she nods her head emphatically to punctuate her point.

"Oh, but yes I am," Chris says looking at me with adoration. "I'm a total babe."

I can't help but smile.

After dinner, I clean up the kitchen while Chris takes the kids into the living room for a little time alone with mommy. They clearly have missed me and are hungry for cuddle time.

I'm still spinning from the switch, but I realize that our lives are too busy to dwell on it. It's just like with any other crisis. We aren't able to lose ourselves in the drama because we have too many precious little lives counting on us to be capable. We need to keep moving forward.

Also, I agree with what Chris said earlier. It's nice having a secret. This entire day I've felt like we're working together. And when we talked about his mom, it was great. I'm glad he's had a chance to see his mom in action. Linda is nothing if not predictable. We haven't had an honest conversation about this stuff in a very long time. It was a relief to finally talk and we didn't fight or make each other miserable.

Maybe this body switch is a good thing. In fact, I'm starting to forget why I was so angry with him before it happened.

I am, however, still a little pissed that he keeps eating. I saw him grab a handful of cookies when he went into the living room. There is nothing I can do to stop it, so I guess I'll just have to spend some more time on the treadmill if we ever switch back.

I just hope I don't have to get out my fat clothes, or even worse, my super fat clothes. I thought about giving them away, but I've fallen for that one before. You lose weight, give away the fat clothes, and then have to suffer the humiliation of buying new fat clothes when you're already depressed about gaining the weight back. It's a vicious cycle.

We spend the entire evening together as a family. There are no texts or emails to distract us. Chris and I have a tea party

with Mady and Emma. Sammi squeals with delight as she jumps around in her duck bouncy and watches us. The kids seem to sense that the tension from the last couple of days has dissipated. They like to see us together and they are all over me. Having Daddy around for a tea party is a big deal and it's kind of fun for me to interact with them as their daddy. After the tea party it's spa time.

Chris figured out a few years ago that he can get the girls to rub his feet and massage his scalp if they think it's a fun game. Emma rubs baby lotion onto Chris's dry, calloused feet. She doesn't even think it's gross. Mady rubs glitter body lotion onto this bald head. I close my eyes and let them touch me. I really needed this. It feels good to have contact with them. I can't believe how quickly I've adapted to all of this. I'm naturally a little bit of a controlling person. You have to be when you are trying to keep all the details of a family straight, but at some point this afternoon, after I adjusted to the shock, I decided to go with it, and it's working. Chris and I are making it all function. The plan is crazy, but this whole situation is crazy. I'm just happy that the girls don't seem to have a clue of what is happening.

Toward the end of the daddy makeover, the girls start to get a little rough. I'm not used to this because they know better than to attack mommy. I do almost everything with my girls, but I don't ever roughhouse. This is a Chris thing.

Unfortunately for me, right now, I'm Chris and they're getting worked up. Emma is the first to go there, she grabs a pillow, and hits me square in the face. Mady and Sammi laugh safely nearby. I can't believe she does this. When we're together Emma is always so proper and well-behaved. Right now her face looks hard and determined. She's ready to rumble. I'm a little frightened I'll do it wrong. I have no practice being a rough and tumble boy, but I decide to go for it.

Emma comes at me a few more times with the pillow. I manage to grab it on the third swing and turn the momentum in my favor. I hit her back and she stops dead, looks me straight in the eye and says, "Is that really the best you can do?" She laughs at her own bravado.

What's this? A challenge. Part of me wants to scold her for being disrespectful to her father, but I'm also very proud that my little girl can be tough when she needs to be.

"Not by a long shot." I stand up and give her a good thunk on the back.

She laughs and charges at my midsection. I grab her around the middle and swing her up over my shoulder. It hurts a little from the old basketball injury, but it's also quite easy. Chris is strong. While she's inverted I tickle at her exposed midsection.

"Mady," she screams through the laughter. "Help me!"

Uh. Oh. Now I'm facing two enemy combatants. I let Emma slide safely down my back and fall onto the couch. I just release her when Mady charges. I grab her in the same way and tickle her, too. This pattern repeats several times until they've formed a line and are taking turns for tickles. I'm surprised, but I'm actually having a lot of fun. I don't think I've ever made them laugh so hard.

Everything is going really well. Emma positions herself and takes a running start into my midsection, but her aim is off by just a little bit.

Upon impact, all outside sensory stimulants instantly cease to exist. Nothing around me is moving. There is no sound. I see bright white lights and feel my whole body physically tense. Every nerve ending has moved to the zone between my legs and each nerve is screaming in pain.

I have just been hit in the balls.

Chris's body crumples to the floor. When I come back around and can regain my position in reality, Mady and Emma are standing off to the side silently watching me. I don't want to scare them, but I have never felt pain like that before. The only thing that is on the same playing field is giving birth, which, may be more painful, but the pain is expected and controlled. The shock of going from glorious play to gut wrenching agony is the part that makes this so terrible.

I look at the girls. They want a sign that I will be okay. I give them a weak smile.

Mady says, "Did I hit your balls again, Daddy?"

I'm shocked my three-year-old knows the word "balls." When I can breathe regularly again, I'll have to confront Chris about this. "Yes, Mads, but it's okay."

"I know. You're supposed to protect them, remember? Last time we hit them, we told you to be more careful with them."

No, I don't remember. I have no idea how to protect or care for balls, but I don't want to take it up with them, so I just nod my head and make a mental note to keep my legs together.

Chris comes into the room. "What happened here?" His eyes are wide with concern. He kneels down beside me.

"Emma hit me between the legs. I feel like I have a stomach ache."

"Oh," he says, nodding in recognition. "Yeah, hurts, doesn't it?"

"You have no idea."

"Actually, I do." He smiles.

"Oh, yeah, right. Is there any way to make it stop?"

"Nope. You're just gonna have to wait it out."

"I was afraid you'd say that." I lay back on the floor and close my eyes. Well, at least I now know what all the fuss is about.

At about eight o'clock, we head upstairs for bed. My balls are feeling much better, but I think they may still be a little swollen.

As we're walking up the stairs, I feel the same tug of apprehension I have every night when it's bedtime. He's going to want sex. I'm sure it's on his mind. Talk about kinky. This is swapping like no one ever even imagined it. There is no way he'd pass on this opportunity.

Chris and I go into the girls' room and do the night-night. When we recite: "Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight." It has extra meaning.

Emma instructs us to make our wish and I do. I wish everything was back to normal. I say this in my head, but as soon as I think it, I take it back. It's a rash decision, but I'm not sure I'm ready to switch back. What was normal before the body switch wasn't great and today things have been much better. Maybe, if we don't switch back right away, we'll be able to fix our marriage. I think I'm starting to fall in love with my husband again.

After night-night is over, I head to our room while he puts Sammi down. At first, this distresses me because I'm the one who puts the babies to bed. I don't even know what to do in our bedroom while it's happening. I grab the remote and flip through a few channels. I'm not used to free time, so I'm bored. But after a few minutes, I see the upside.

I'm alone. I'm free. I can shower without interruption, just as Chris always does. How liberating. I head to the bathroom with my best pumice stone, determined to do some more work on his awful feet.

Chapter 21

Chris as Amanda

When it was time to make my wish, I don't. I know I should want to, but this is just such a unique experience I'm not ready to stop it. I enjoy seeing the world from Amanda's point of view. It's nice to sit in the nursery late at night with Sammi. I don't get to hold the babies much. Amanda does almost all of the work until they can walk and talk.

I'm not sure I had any idea how incredibly calming it is to hold my daughter while she sleeps. I look at her tiny face. Her lips are still making suckling gestures from the bottle I just removed from them. I actually feel my heart get bigger and tears form in my eyes. I'm not sure if it is the post-pregnancy hormones that are still present in my wife's body, or the fact that I'm a woman right now, or if it is just the natural reaction a person feels when looking into the face of his sleeping child. Whatever it is, it's pretty fucking cool. I don't think I've really thought of Sammi as her

own person. She's been more of an abstract idea than my child, but sitting here in the soft light holding her makes me fall head over heels in love with this kid.

I have a moment of clarity. I have missed so much of their lives. I've barely put in any time taking care of my babies and they are growing up quickly. I try to remember what Emma looked like as a baby, but I can't do it. I can't bring the details of her baby face into focus.

It's always been Amanda feeding the babies, changing the diapers, and holding them while they sleep. She takes care of them when they are sick and chases away the monsters in the dark. All of this happens while I'm on a computer doing more stuff for my job. I feel sorry for what I've sacrificed. Amanda has gotten the incredible gift of raising my children and I have been on the sidelines missing a lot of really cool stuff.

I make myself a promise. I won't let this happen anymore. I'm going to be there for my kids and I'm going to get to feel this sense of peace and love much more often. It's way better than answering email.

Even though Sammi goes to sleep almost immediately, I stay in the nursery for about an hour. I just can't get over how cool it is to take care of my baby daughter. When I finally allow myself to lay her in the crib and head to my room, I think about Amanda.

Every night, I entertain the thought that we'll have sex. Even though she almost always begs off, I still go to bed hoping to convince her. In this one aspect of my life, I am an eternal optimist. Tonight is no exception. I am anxious to try out sex in her body. In fact, I cannot wait.

I open the door and realize I am going to have to wait. I see my body, wearing pajamas I didn't even know I owned, and socks (who wears socks to bed? Socks!), sleeping on the wrong side of the bed.

Amanda is dead asleep in my body. I usually sleep on my back, sprawled all over the bed, but she has my body curled into a tight little ball, hugging a pillow. I think about waking her up for sex, but I know it's been a long day and it's probably a miracle that she was able to fall asleep so easily.

I take off her clothes and look at her naked body in the full-length mirror. *Boobies, boobies, boobies.* Nice. Great ass. Great tits. Oh well, maybe tomorrow. I crawl onto the bed next to her. I sprawl out and fall asleep almost instantly.

I've been asleep for about an hour when I start to stir because I can feel someone staring at me. I open one eye and see Mady. She's climbed up onto our bed and is sitting cross-legged close to my head. She's staring at me. I gasp. Amanda stirs, but continues to sleep. Must be nice.

"Why you not wearing your clothes?" Mady asks. "You always wear your clothes."

She's right. Amanda is only ever completely naked in the shower. Even when she's changing clothes she'll put her new pants on before she takes off her shirt. She's very uncomfortable with the idea of being naked.

"Umm... Hi, Mady," I say, not sure how to answer. "What are you doing here?"

"What do you mean? I always come at night."

Creepy. "Oh, yeah, I forgot?"

"I came over now because I had a bad dream and I needed to cuddle," she says. "Why are you not wearing clothes?"

I scramble for a blanket hoping that if I cover myself, it'll change the conversation. "You need to go to sleep."

"Okay," Mady says. "Can I sleep with you? I can take off my clothes, too?" She starts to pull her pajama top over her head.

God Lord, no! "No, Mady. Leave your jammies on, I'll put on a t-shirt." I grab a t-shirt from the floor and pull it over my head. "Then we can cuddle?"

"Okay." She lays her head on my pillow. "I'll take off my jama bottoms and then we can cuddle in our shirts."

"No, baby. Leave your pants on. I'll put on my pants, too." I get up, again, put on the sweats Amanda had on last night. I'm instantly uncomfortable. I love to be naked almost as much as Amanda hates it.

I crawl into the bed beside Mady. She snuggles into me and it's not long before she's back to sleep. I get out of bed and carry her back to her room and tuck her in again. I'm almost out the door, when I hear Emma whisper, "Mom, is that you?"

Shit. Does Amanda do this every night while I'm sleeping? No wonder she's so tired. "Yeah, Emma, it's Mommy."

"Will you stay with me until I fall asleep again?"

I feel like saying "no," but I look over at Emma's face bathed in the glow of the princess nightlight and I can't resist her.

"Sure, sweetheart. I'll lay down with you."

I crawl into bed beside her and stay until I hear her breathing become slow and steady. I untangle myself from her arms and crawl out of bed. I've been at this for more than an hour. How does Amanda do this? I pull off the t-shirt and sweats, fall onto our bed, and I'm asleep in an instant.

Chapter 22

Amanda as Chris

I stir when I hear the baby on the monitor. She's not crying yet, but soon she will be. I've had the strangest dream. Chris and I switched bodies and …

I feel my shoulder ache. I try to reposition myself. I know for sure it's not a strange dream when I try to roll over and realize that I can't because my penis is hard.

I have morning wood. I know about this because Chris often mentions that I could help him take care of it. Now I know why, because this is actually really uncomfortable. I'm not sure how Chris handles it. I usually try to escape with the baby before he wakes up. I don't like having an erect penis. It feels full and I don't have the slightest clue how to relieve the pressure. I kind of feel like I have to pee, so I head to the bathroom.

After a whole day in Chris's body, I think I'm finally over my bathroom jitters. I go in and pee. Instantly, it feels better and the

swelling starts to go away. Huh. I think I've mastered basic penis handling. Well, I had some experience with it before, but now I have a whole new appreciation.

I wash my hands and decide to the get the baby. I thought it was a female intuition that made me so aware of the baby at night. Sometimes, I wake when I hear her roll over, but it must not be a female thing because Chris still has my body sound asleep. Even when he's the mommy, he's the one who gets eight uninterrupted hours.

I'm so disturbed at seeing my body sleep naked and sprawling (what if the kids came in!? Mady almost always does!) I grab the blanket and throw it over top. Chris squirms a little and the blanket falls off my breasts. I guess I'll have to settle for half coverage. I don't get to make these choices for myself right now, so I have to accept what Chris decides to do, but that doesn't mean I'm comfortable looking at it. I go into the nursery and grab Sammi and her bottle.

When I get back to our bedroom, Sammi sees her mommy and starts reaching out with her little arms. Chris hears this and opens his eyes.

"Hey, Mommy," I say jokingly. "Your daughter wants you." I'm getting used to this whole idea of having an active co-parent.

Chris sits up and squints at us.

"Glasses." A friendly reminder.

"Oh yeah," he says through a yawn. "Forgot."

We head downstairs with Sammi. Emma and Mady will still sleep for at least another hour. He takes the baby into the family room and gives her a bottle.

I take two mugs of fresh coffee into the family room and set one beside him before curling up on the end of the couch.

He looks at me and laughs, "You know, men don't usually sit like that."

He's right. I look kind of ridiculous curled up with my legs underneath me. "Does it matter right now? It's just us and I'm comfortable."

"No. I'll admit that I'm a little impressed you can get my body to do that. Doesn't it hurt your balls?"

I shake my head no.

"Maybe I've been missing out on all the things my body can do."

I smile. He's really making me happy. We're having fun with each other and I love it.

"Okay." I turn the conversation to important matters. "It looks like our plan to switch back last night didn't work. We're going to have to figure out a strategy for today, what is this work thing you need me to do tonight?" I'm a little scared to do it, but Chris promised me it would be okay and I trust him.

"I need you to run the test review. I have it put together in a computer file and all you need to do is ask the question then let them try to answer. I'll give you printouts with the right answers so you'll know if they're getting it. It should be fairly straightforward."

"Yeah, but aren't they going to expect me, who they think is you, to know their names? Some of them have had you for more than one class and I won't even be able to recognize them."

My face turns red and Chris seems distracted. Clearly, there is something on his mind, but I'm not sure what it is.

"Chris, is something wrong? You look like you've just been punched in the balls."

Chapter 23

Chris as Amanda

Shit. Shit. Shit. Jenna. Shit.

She will be at the test review, and the way I left things… Oh my God! The way I left things! I almost fucked her in my office on Friday! She thinks I'm going to have an affair with her! I was going to have an affair with her! She's going to be all over me.

Shit. Amanda is going to get ambushed and she is for sure going to find out about Jenna. *Shit.* I was so distracted by everything going on yesterday and so focused on Amanda, I completely forgot about Jenna. Why didn't I wish to switch back? I'm an idiot. *Shit. Shit. Shit.*

"I…I…," I'm stammering. I need to think of something. "I… You're right. You won't know who they are. You can't go in there. I'll cancel."

"Don't be ridiculous. If this whole thing keeps up, I'm going to have to face your class sometime. It may be easier at this test

review than it will be in class on Tuesday. Besides, it's too late. Let's just look them up on social media and I'll be able to see what they look like. You said the class is small. I can do this. I want to do this for you."

Of course she does. Now what do I do?

I put the sleeping baby down on the couch and sit down beside my wife. We log on to my social media account and I start to show her my students.

"Thomas is a good kid. Kind of quiet in class, but he writes great papers. I had him in my social media class last spring and he did a great job. We've had a few conversations about an internship in the city lately, so he may ask you about that. Just be vague. Oh, and sometimes, I tease him about his long hair. It's an ongoing joke."

"Okay. Got it. Can you start a folder on the desktop and save one of his photos? Maybe we can print out a cheat sheet with some of this stuff."

Yeah and next to Jenna's picture it will say "girl who wants to fuck my husband". "Good idea. Let's keep going." We make it through nineteen more students and the only one left is Jenna. I'm terrified to click on her profile. I'm not sure what it will say or if we've ever had a questionable message exchange. I'm fairly certain it's okay. We save the inappropriate stuff for texting and phone calls. In fact, one of the biggest challenges has been trying to keep my phone away from Amanda. I deleted all the old texts, but I need to make sure Jenna doesn't send anything new that may get me in trouble.

"Finally, this is Jenna." I click on her profile.

"Oh, Jenna." Amanda draws out the name in recognition. "Doesn't she have a crush on you or something?"

I almost choke on my coffee. I didn't think Amanda remembered. I barely talked to her about it. I should have known that she'd file that one away in her marital archives.

"Yeah, something like that," I say. *And I was kind of planning on fucking her next week until this whole body switch thing happened.*

"How did you end up handling that anyway?"

Made out with her in my office. "Uh." I don't know what to say.

If I've learned anything from yesterday, it's Amanda and I can fix our marriage. Before the switch, I was almost convinced

that it was unfixable, but now I know I want to stay married to her. I want to be her best friend again. I am still in love with my wife. Also, I'm not sure there is any way we could break up because we're kind of stuck in each other's bodies.

I decide I have to downplay the situation. She can't know that I've been thinking about cheating on her with Jenna. She can't know that at our last office visit Jenna and I gave into our attraction and chemistry.

"I told her to back off. She was crushed, but you know, it happens."

"Good," she says. "You know I never told you this, but since we've grown apart, I've been frightened that you may be tempted to cheat."

Who me?

"I know it's stupid." She pulls her cheeks and nose upward and closes her eyes with embarrassment. "You're not the type of guy who would do something so dishonest, but I'm not as sexual as I used to be and you are surrounded by these young, attractive girls. I hope you're not too mad I thought you may be capable of that. I know I was wrong." She looks up from the computer and gives me a sheepish smile.

"Don't be silly." I pray she can't see through my lie.

"I know they're smart, and young, and really cute." She's on a roll now, dishing out guilt at breakneck speed. "I guess I've been insecure, but this whole messed up situation has helped me get past that. I really feel connected to you and I'm starting to realize that underneath all the responsibility and work and bullshit, we're still here. You and me."

I feel so small hearing her say this. I want to run out of the house and jump off a bridge, but I'm not sure if I'd be committing suicide or killing my wife. There is no easy way out of this. All I can do is hope for the best and try to figure out a way to get back into my body and end things with Jenna, once and for all, as clearly and as kindly as possible.

Amanda is looking at me to affirm what she's just said. She needs to hear that I'm feeling the same things. "I know, baby. I feel connected to you, too." I really do.

We spend the next half hour making her cheat sheet and shortly after we're done, Emma and Mady come downstairs and join us. Amanda sits with the girls in the living room while I make

breakfast for the family (well, if you call pouring milk and cereal, making breakfast).

The rest of the day passes without much incident. I'm surprised I never really get a chance to sit down and rest. I move from one task to the next. I don't even get a chance to look at the scores on TV. It's a good thing the Steelers don't play until Monday night. If I had to miss the game, I just don't think I could do it.

I suppose I've seen Amanda juggle all this stuff for years, but never really paid attention. Now, it's my turn and every time someone cries or yells, "Mom," I'm on the go. Rarely do they call for their daddy and I'm starting to see just how unfair this arrangement is. It didn't bother me when I was on the other side, but now that I'm the mommy, I see that Amanda deals with a lot. She's in the bedroom going over the test review materials on the laptop. I wish I was her.

Sometime after I'm done dressing the girls (Mady's wearing a too-small pink Steeler's jersey with green Christmas tights and her electric blue dance tutu), it hits me that I'm going to have to be alone with the girls. I'm just not ready for this and I know I'll be distracted at the thought of Amanda doing my test review with Jenna sitting there in the same room ogling me. Hell, Jenna may even get Amanda alone and try to have sex with her/me. This is a nightmare.

Then it hits me. I have a solution. I have to go to that test review with Amanda.

I call Roxy.

"Mandy, of course Joaquin and I will watch the kids tonight," Roxy says. "I'm so happy that you are spending time with Christopher. I felt bad yesterday that I couldn't help, so this is good."

"Thanks, Roxy. You're a life saver."

"I can't remember the last time you asked me to watch the kids so that you and Christopher could go out and now you are asking twice in one weekend?"

"Yeah, we're getting along really well."

"I knew if you told him how you felt things could get better. I'm really glad you listened to me because on Friday I thought for sure you were going to file for divorce, but it seems like that is definitely out of the question now. Right?"

"Uh. Right." *File for divorce? What the hell?* I'm so shocked, I almost drop the phone. I had no idea Amanda was talking to her best friend about leaving me. I know things haven't been great,

but why would she talk to Roxy about it and not me? I'm hurt. I have to get off the phone.

"We're really trying to spend more time together. You know, to work on our problems." I try to keep it vague, because as usual, I have no idea what my wife's specific complaint is at any given time. Evidently, it's a big enough complaint to warrant talk of divorce.

"I'll be over at six o'clock. Joaquin and I will put the girls to bed and stay until you get back."

"Thanks, Roxy. I really need this."

"Any time, Mandy. Any time."

After I hang up the phone, I just stare at it. My wife was thinking about divorcing me. She talked to her friend about it. I can't believe it. How can her perception of what is going on be so different from mine? I know I was thinking about cheating, but I was never seriously planning to leave Amanda for Jenna. I just wanted a fling to make me feel appreciated. Now, to hear that my wife was willing to break up the family, it makes me wonder why she was (is?) so unhappy. Maybe I'll get a chance to talk to her about it tonight, that is, if I can keep Jenna away from Amanda.

And as for Jenna, why did I do that? What was I thinking? I'm even more scared now that I know Amanda would divorce me. If she left me, where would I be? I'd be middle aged and alone. I wouldn't have this great house with great kids and the family I love. No, I have to make sure Amanda never finds out about Jenna. I need to save my marriage.

Chapter 24

Amanda as Chris

I'm a little shocked when Chris tells me he's coming along with me tonight. I can't shake the feeling he doesn't trust me alone with his students. However, I'm relieved that he'll be there to help, so I let it go. Besides, we haven't spent this much time together in years and I'm really loving it.

I can do this. I know I can do this. Chris gave me all his notes and walked me through the test review. This should be a piece of cake. I haven't done anything like this in a long time. When he was helping me prepare for tonight, it reminded me of when we were in college. Chris and I both majored in Communication (me journalism, him public relations), so we took some classes together.

I still remember the first time I met him at a party on Fifth Avenue. He got my friend, Lauren, to introduce us. He wanted my number, but I saw that he was there with a girl named Pam and I

wasn't at all interested in giving my phone number to a guy who would hit on a girl at a party when his girlfriend was in the other room. I thought he was a real asshole.

After the party, it felt like I saw him everywhere I went. If I went to the food court for dinner, he was there. I'd head to the student center to turn in my article to my editor, and imagine that, Chris is at the snack bar. I would have been alarmed, but he was organizing some sort of public relations campaign within our network of mutual friends.

We went to a small school, around 4,000 students, so everybody pretty much knew everybody else. And he was using this to his advantage. He had a lot of my friends tell me what a good guy he was, and eventually, I decided to give him a chance. I didn't want to date him, even though I thought he was incredibly good looking, but I'd try to be friends.

At first, we were just classmates. After we got married, he confessed to me that he took a class in news reporting he didn't need just because he knew I'd be in it and it was his chance to win me over. Then, a few months later, after we'd both had too much to drink, we hooked up. From then on, we were inseparable, best friends and lovers.

He's two years older than me. However, he only graduated a semester before me. He started college late because of his dad's illness, but he's never seemed older than me. After his graduation, he stayed on at school to work on his master's degree.

He proposed the day I graduated. He bought me a small, but very nice diamond ring. It wasn't expensive, but I didn't care. I was totally in love with Chris and I wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of my life with him by my side.

We got married a few months later in a small ceremony in a church just off campus. I don't think my mom was very happy. She wanted something more elaborate, but I knew no one could afford it, and to be honest, it didn't really matter. I didn't care about the wedding I had dreamed up as a little girl. All I cared about was the man who would be my husband. The wedding wasn't nearly as important to me as the marriage I was going to have and the family that would follow. I smile thinking back to those days.

Right after the wedding, I got a part-time job at the newspaper and worked in a flower shop to help make ends meet. Our first apartment was a complete dump, but we were happy there.

This is part of what makes my relationship with Chris so very special. We built our family together. Neither of us had much to begin with, but now we have something real. I shudder to think that just a few days ago I was seriously considering chucking it all in the trash.

Working together to prepare for tonight's test review felt like it did when we used to stay up all night helping each other. Sometimes, I would help him with a paper for graduate school. Other nights, he would work with me to crunch numbers for a big news story. It wasn't about any particular project, just the thrill of having a partner you can rely on to help you. Chris and I were losing that, but the body switch is forcing us to rediscover it.

Even though we've done everything possible to prepare for the test review, on the drive to campus, a knot forms in my stomach. I look to Chris for reassurance, but he's chewing at his lips so furiously that nearly all of his lipstick is chewed off. I guess he's equally afraid I'll screw it up for him.

"I know you're worried."

"Huh?" he asks looking concerned. "I mean, no. Of course not, you'll be great."

"I can tell you think I'm going to mess this up. I haven't had a real job in a long time."

"What do you mean? You take care of our family. That's a real job."

"Not one that gets me out into the world. I don't blame you for doubting me. I doubt me."

"Amanda, I don't doubt you. You are the smartest, most competent person I know. The only thing I'm worried about is the logistics. This is an awkward situation and I want it to go smoothly for you."

"Thanks, Chris. I really needed to hear that." I know he knows I'm smart, but it's been a long time since he's said it to me. It feels good that he still holds me in such high regard professionally.

We get to campus and while Chris is in his office checking voicemail, I get on to the computer at the teachers station and try the login information he gave me. It doesn't work. Shit. All the slides are saved to his email. I'm not sure I can do this without them. I try again. Still doesn't work. "Now what am I going to do?" I mutter to myself.

"Need help?" asks a pretty, young girl who just walked in the door.

She heads my way, at first I'm too distracted by my problems to recognize her, but there is something about the way she talks to me (to Chris) that makes me aware of who she is. She's Jenna. I look up and give her a once over.

The profile I looked at with Chris (and later in our bedroom when I was "working" on the test review) was pretty typical of what I would expect. Her picture was cut from a larger group photo of her with a friend on either side. They were clearly at a party and one of the red, plastic beer cups was partially visible in the bottom corner of the image. She was overly made up in a way that only young girls can pull off (I know because I used to be able to pull it off).

In the photo, her shirt is low cut and I noticed her small, perky breasts that have not expanded and collapsed for several pregnancies. There were a lot of different albums of her to look at. Jenna's Birthday Album...Jenna's Beach Vacay...Jenna at Home... she was a typical twenty-something. She documented her every move and put it on her profile so her friends could see it.

She also had many posts, like "I can't wait to hang with my girlies tonight, holla!" and "Bummed because of the rain. Don't want to write this paper." The only interesting part of her posts was the fact that she tagged Chris's name on a lot of them. Like, "Here we go Steelers. I know Chris Claridge is going to be a good mood this week because the Steelers will wreck the Ravens."

Chris commented, "Right on, Jenna Clarke J." Tagging her name in the post so that she would know he mentioned her, too.

There were many examples of this kind of friendly back and forth. Also, a couple of private messages about meeting up to discuss research and tests. While there was absolutely nothing untoward about the communication between my husband and his student, I couldn't figure out why he would engage her so much when he knows she has a crush on him.

Something seems off about this, but Chris told me that he handled it and I believe him. The last two days have made it so I can trust my relationship again. This feels like a huge relief. Even though we still have problems we need to talk about, I'm not dreading the conversations, I feel like I have a newfound understanding of why Chris does what he does and I hope this will help me figure out a way to approach the problems in our marriage.

"Hello, Jenna." I lower my tone to sound professorial. "Yeah, I could use a little help. I can't seem to get this log in to work."

"You can't get it to work, what kind of Comm professor are you if you can't even get the computer to start?"

Oh shit, she knows. I panic.

She laughs. "You should have seen your face. Classic. I was just joking, Chris. Let me see." She comes up behind me and leans over my shoulder and I feel her breath on the side of my face.

Why would she call him Chris? His students call him Dr. Claridge. She feels a little too close. It's weird, but I feel chemistry with her. "There, that should do it. You forgot to include the local domain with your user name. You always have to include the @ nou.edu when you are on a lab computer. You know that." She's smiling.

I decide that any misgivings I may have had are unfounded. Chris wouldn't cheat on me or do anything inappropriate with a student. He's just not that kind of guy. I decide I kind of like Jenna. She really saved my ass and I think she'll be an ally at the review session. Even if she has feelings for Chris, he told me he took care of it. The crush has been crushed.

"I know, just distracted I guess." I give her a big smile.

"Why distracted?" She's flirting. I stand up and take a step back. I don't want to lead her on.

Just then, Chris enters the room. There is a strange look on his face when he sees me with Jenna. He practically runs to the teacher's station and inserts himself between us. He thrusts his hand toward Jenna.

"Hello," he says overzealously. "I'm Amanda Claridge, Chris's wife."

He seems aggressive and I can tell from the look on her face that Jenna is not impressed to meet me.

Chapter 25

Chris as Amanda

I walk into the room and see Jenna flirting with me. I'm not sure what to do, so I run to the front of the room, push my way between them, and introduce Jenna to my wife. I see the unmistakable anger on Jenna's face when I do this. It's the same kind of look she gives Charlie every time he interrupts us.

"Uh, hi Mrs. Claridge," her voice halts, bitten off by a snap of her lips into a compressed line. She's looking around me trying to make eye contact with the person she thinks is Chris. I bob and weave to block her. She's undeterred, still trying to shoot him a private look. I have to do something to interrupt. I grab Chris's face and rub at an imaginary mark on his cheek.

"You have some lipstick on your cheek from earlier." Jenna really doesn't like this. She turns on her heel and marches to a seat in the front row, grabs her phone, and starts texting. Amanda

uses my face to give me a confused look. I stand on tiptoe (I really am inconveniently tall) and whisper, "Sorry about that. She's a stalker. I thought it may cool her off to meet you."

"I thought you already talked to her and cooled her off?" Amanda whispers back suspiciously.

"I did, but you know, it's still a balancing act."

"She was really nice to me. I was hoping that I'd be able to rely on her during the review. I thought it may be nice to have an ally in the room to help me get through this."

Jenna is not Amanda's ally. She's not my ally. She's a major danger to our relationship. I can't tell Amanda this and we don't have time to take the conversation any further because the other students are starting to show up. I see them and they look at me quizzically. They don't know who I am and they are unsure how to react to a stranger in the room.

"We can talk more about Jenna later. You're going to have to introduce me," I say. "My students have never met you."

"Um... Okay." She clears her throat and it doesn't make much of an impact. I can tell she's nervous and afraid.

"You'll be great," I whisper encouragingly. "Remember, you are the smartest woman I know." I told her this earlier and it seemed to help. Besides, I believe it.

She looks vulnerable. "I can do this?" She's still unsure of herself.

"You bet your sweet ass you can." She is the best, most capable human being I know and I thank God for this because the session is about to begin and she has my career in her hands.

Chapter 26

Amanda as Chris

I'm not sure how to begin. I felt pretty confident, but the way Chris acted when I was talking to Jenna freaked me out. Again, I can't shake the feeling that he doesn't trust me to be alone with his students. I look around the room at the faces. I recognize all of them from the cheat sheet Chris and I prepared earlier today. Thomas... Jerica... Richard... Christina... I think I'll be able to handle this.

Chris wants me to introduce him. I try to clear my throat, but I'm still nervous. He tells me I'm the smartest woman he knows. I make him say it again because I need to hear it. I look at my face for signs that he's insincere, but there aren't any. He believes I can do this. The last of the fear falls away and I start talking.

"Hey, everyone," I say in Chris's booming voice. "I'm ready to get started, but first, I want to introduce you all to someone special. This is my wife, Amanda."

Chris stands up and gives a little wave. "Nice to meet you all. I've heard a lot about how great you are."

He tries to look feminine, but overdoes it a bit and kind of makes me look a little crazy. It doesn't seem to bother the students. They look at Chris in my body and seem to approve, so I move on. I've practiced at home, so the slides are familiar.

After the first five or ten minutes, I find a rhythm. I joke and they joke back. It's all going really well. The students are warm and they clearly have a lot of respect for Chris. We're all having a genuinely good time, well, all of us except for Jenna. She's sitting in the front row sulking. I specifically ask her a question and she just spits an answer at me. I'm not sure why this is going on. I guess it's because of the crush, but she's taking it awfully hard, and after she was so nice to me in the beginning. I decide to talk to her when this is done. I'll try to make sure she's okay.

I click on the final slide and tell the students I'll see them on Tuesday. They thank me for the review and exit the room. A few hang back to ask other questions, Chris is standing close by in case I need help, but I don't. When I get a minute, I look for Jenna, but she's gone. I make a mental note to tell Chris my concerns on the drive home, but first I need to visit the little boys' room. Only one problem, I don't know where it is.

"Hey, Amanda," I say to Chris. "I need to go to the bathroom."

"Okay."

"You need to show me where I'm going," I whisper.

"Oh yeah, right, forgot." He smiles at me.

"You were great by the way. They loved you. I think you were even better than I would have been."

"Thanks, Chris. That means a lot."

We walk down the hallway to the bathroom and I head in. "This may take a few minutes. I get a lot of stage fright."

"Take your time. I'll be right here waiting when you're done."

I head into the bathroom just as Jenna walks out of the ladies' room. I think about stopping to talk to her, but I really have to pee, so I just keep going.

Chapter 27

Chris as Amanda

When she walks out of the bathroom, it looks like she's been crying. I'm not used to seeing her a mess. She makes sure she's quite the opposite when I see her.

We make eye contact and I know I have to say something. I feel really guilty for letting this get out of control and hurting her feelings like this.

"Hi. Are you okay?" My brow furrows with concern. "You look like you've been crying."

She looks at me and I see a shift in her facial features. They go from sad and vulnerable to hard and determined.

"I have been crying and I'm *not* okay," she says, "I'm really upset because you shouldn't be here tonight."

I'm flabbergasted. I don't know where this is going, but I can't stop it now.

"In fact, you shouldn't be with him at all. He's told me all about you. He told me that you yell. A lot. He told me you make him feel bad about himself and you're cold and unappreciative. I know all about you, Amanda." There is so much venom in her voice I feel like running away.

"Jenna-" I don't know what to say, but I want her to stop.

"Look, don't blame me for this. If you won't fuck your husband, don't be surprised when someone else comes in and fills the void. Besides, Chris needs someone who is his intellectual equal, not some stupid, bored housewife."

I just stand there in stunned silence and take the abuse Jenna is throwing at my wife.

"If you and Chris want to try to work it out, be my guest, but I think you should know that he's been with me for a whole semester now and I'm not going to just walk away from this. I'm in too deep with him. I love him and I'll fight for him. He's going to be with me. It's just a matter of time. After all, why would he want you when he can have me?" She gestures at herself, gives me a look that is both disgusted and dismissive at that same time, turns on her heel, and stomps away.

I am in deep shit. The only thing I have going for me is that Amanda wasn't in her body to hear Jenna tell her about our fling. I had no idea that Jenna was in love with me. I thought it was about sex and flirting and all the easy stuff.

I may have wanted to sleep with Jenna, but I am not in love with her and I can't believe she would say all this stuff to my wife. In fact, I kind of hate her a little bit for saying that stuff to Amanda. How did she come up with that? Is this what I've been saying about Amanda? Have I told Jenna that Amanda yells all the time and that she is "cold and unappreciative"? Did I tell Jenna that Amanda is not my equal? If I said those things, or even implied those things. I'm a complete asshole.

I don't feel that way. I've just been upset because things haven't been going well. When I would talk to Jenna, she was always so sympathetic. She always took my side. Now, I see what a huge mistake that was. I'm ashamed that I've talked about my marriage like that. I'm ashamed of everything I've done with Jenna.

I don't have much time to think about it because Amanda is walking out of the men's room. My face looks so happy. I recognize that as the same high I get when I know I've done a great job

in the classroom. She doesn't even seem to notice the horrified look on her own face.

She walks up to me bends down and kisses me. It's been a very long time since Amanda initiated a real kiss between the two of us. It figures it's when she's outside of her own body, but I kiss her back all the same. I'm suddenly struck with fear that I may not be able to hide the Jenna situation from her for much longer and if I can't this may be one of the final kisses we share. I try to push the thoughts out of my head and just kiss her back.

Chapter 28

Amanda as Chris

On the ride home, I talk to Chris about his class and his students. I relive the highlights of the night, basking in the fact that I've done a really good job. Chris seems excited for me, but he also seems distracted. I'm not sure why.

"That was fun."

"You were great. I couldn't have done it better. You're a natural. My students will be disappointed when they get me back."

"Don't be silly, Chris, but I must admit, it felt good to do something new. I think I've been in a rut. The only thing that really didn't seem to go well was Jenna. At first, I could have sworn she was flirting with me, but during the review, she seemed almost to ignore me. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah," he says. "She was a bit off. I think it was because I, er you, were there. She didn't expect to meet the wife and I think I may have underestimated her crush."

"Really? How so?" He's finally opening up a little about this. I'm hoping that he'll be able to explain all the social media posts and the fact that she called him by his first name.

"I guess I thought she was over it, but she's not. I think maybe while we're in each other's bodies, you should avoid her. You know, don't answer her texts, or emails, or direct messages. Also, try not to be alone with her."

"That seems a little extreme." He doesn't understand women at all. "I'm sure if I just talked to her..."

"No!" he says interrupting me. "You should try to avoid her and ignore her. Look, Amanda, I didn't think she was capable of it, but after the reaction she had tonight, I'm afraid she may try to start trouble for me at work."

"You didn't do anything. How could she start trouble?"

"I'm running for chair, if she decides to make up a story or something, I can deny it all I want. It'll still hurt me professionally. Besides, I was trying to be nice to her, so I am her social media friend and we've messaged a lot. The other kids have seen this, and now that she's acting strange. I'm afraid it may be easy to misinterpret our relationship. I should have never let her friend me, but it's too late now." I'm happy that he's opening up and admitting the mistake.

"Oh, okay." He's acting paranoid. "I guess that could happen, but, I still think I'd be able to clear this up."

"We have other things to concentrate on." He changes the subject. "Like what are we going to do tonight? Are we going to make our wishes to change back again?"

I hadn't thought about it. We've both been so busy trying to keep our lives on track. "Yeah, I think we need to, don't you?" I don't tell him that I'm kind of enjoying this. He's acting so strange about Jenna. I thought I couldn't wait to be back in my body, but things are going so well that I don't want it to end. I know it didn't work last night and I'm glad it didn't. I kind of want one more day.

"Yeah, so it's settled. Tonight we make the wish again." It's probably best to just let him think this. Besides, we're not even sure the wish would work.

When we get home, I see Roxy and I want to tell her all about my night. I want to tell her how alive I felt in the classroom. Not necessarily because of what I was doing, but because Chris was

watching me and cheering me on and I really felt like he was proud of me. I want to confide in her, but I can't because she goes right up to Chris and starts talking to him. It suddenly strikes me that she may tell him some stuff I don't want him to know. My head fills with the things I say I wouldn't want him to know I say.

I rush over to Chris and Roxy. "How was everything?" I interject myself into their conversation.

"It was very good." Roxy furrows her brow and gives me the side eye, confused at my participation in the conversation. "The girls played Legos with Joaquin and I took care of beautiful, little Samantha. Joaquin just went home a few minutes ago to do his homework."

"That's great. Good night, Roxy." I'm practically throwing her out the door.

She looks at me like I'm nuts, she clearly wants to stay and talk, but instead she looks at Chris and says, "Call me tomorrow, Mandy. We'll hang out. I want to know everything."

"Okay," Chris replies. Shit. I'm going to have to warn him about some of the stuff I've been saying.

After Roxy leaves, we head to bed. I'm feeling really close to Chris and I think that maybe tonight we'll get a chance to act on it. It's been a long time since we had sex and I'm pretty sure he'll be on board with this.

We stop by our room first. The big girls are in their room waiting for us and looking at books. Sammi is safely tucked into her bed. I know I have to tell him that I've been talking to Roxy about divorcing him. I regret every word of it now, but I have to admit it to him.

"Chris, I have to tell you something." He looks bewildered and a little scared.

"What is it?"

"I, um, er, I'm not sure how to say this." My words are failing me. I threw them around so easily with Roxy, but now, they won't come out of my mouth.

"Just say it." I place a hand on my shoulder. "I'm listening."

"Before the swap, you know, things were kind of getting really bad between us."

"You can say that again."

"And, well, I was thinking that maybe it would be better for all of us, if we, you know, got a divorce." I whisper the last word, hoping he won't hear it come out of my mouth.

"I know." There's a calming lack of reaction that I hadn't expected. "Roxy told me."

I'm floored. He already knows and he didn't even mention it to me.

"And?"

"And, I don't blame you for thinking about it. I probably was thinking the same thing. I just didn't talk to anyone about it. Things were bad and we were growing apart. I didn't like you very much, but now, well, now, I feel like that was a long time ago."

"It was Friday."

"We were literally different people on Friday. If I've learned one thing from this whole body swapping business, it's that we can make this work again. I love you. I've always loved you and I want to be married to you. I'll do whatever it takes to make that happen."

I run over to him and throw my giant arms around his small body. I kiss him and tell him, "I'm sorry, I love you, too. We can make this work." I feel a major sense of relief at coming clean. Our marriage is going to work again. I love this man.

We're interrupted by two little girls standing in our doorway giggling. "Eww," they say in unison. "Daddy kissed Mommy."

"Come here you weasels." They run in the opposite direction, giggling all the way. I chase them down the hallway. I hear sounds from the nursery and look in and see Sammi standing in her crib. We were too loud. I grab her and head into the girls' room.

Chris follows us and we go through the routine. At the end we say the familiar verse, "Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight." At the end, I close my eyes and think about how much fun I've had these last two days. I wish Chris and I stay this way for another day.

After we're finished, we turn off the lights. I head to the bathroom to shower and get ready for bed. When I come into the room, I'm surprised that he's not here yet. He's still in the nursery with Sammi. I lay down and wait, I'm eager to reconnect with him now that I feel confident in our marriage, but after about a half hour of waiting, I fall asleep.

Chapter 29

Chris as Amanda

Amanda is already sleeping when I get into the room. I waited with Sammi for a long time hoping this would happen. I got the vibe from her that she wanted to have sex and after what happened with Jenna, I just couldn't bring myself to do it (maybe I really am turning into a woman?!?!).

I feel so guilty lying to her, especially now that we're getting close again. I want to confess everything, particularly after she had the guts to tell me what she was saying to Roxy. It was the perfect opportunity for me to come clean, but now that I know how close she really came to asking for a divorce. My fear is too great. I'm just going to try to keep it from her and hopefully, I'll be back in my body soon and in a situation where I'll be able to put an end to my relationship with Jenna, once and for all.

I get ready for bed and it doesn't take long for me to pass out.

I've only been asleep for a short time when I feel the eyes on me again. I open mine and see Mady. She's not in bed this time, instead she's standing beside the bed, just staring.

"How long have you been there?" I guess we haven't switched back yet.

"Not long. You have jamas on. Did you know I was coming?"

"I thought you might." I put on the pajamas last night before I got into bed. It is uncomfortable for me to wear them, but I didn't want a repeat of last night. "Did you need something?"

"Are you sure you're my mommy?"

Now, I'm feeling awake. "Yes, of course, I am." I lie.

"You don't act like my mommy. Maybe you are my other mommy?"

She has another mommy, news to me. "No, Mady. I'm your only mommy and I love you."

"I love you, too, but I still don't believe you are my mommy. Can I sleep with you?"

When I was in my own body, I had a hard and fast rule that the kids were not allowed to sleep in our bed. Amanda protested at first, but in the end, she just went in and laid down with them until they fell asleep.

I figure that since it was my rule in the first place, I should be able to break it. I pull the covers back. "Crawl in."

Mady gets into bed and snuggles up beside me. "Good night, other mommy." She's sound asleep in minutes and it doesn't take much longer until I'm sleeping, too.

I put Mady back in her bed around three o'clock. I realized then that we didn't switch back. After that, I had a hard time sleeping. I just kept thinking about how bad it would be if Amanda found out about Jenna. I finally gave up on sleeping when Sammi woke up at six a.m. and I brought her downstairs. This schedule is wearing me down. It's hard to get up so early after such a rough night. I used to know fraternity boys who had more stable sleep patterns than my wife.

When Amanda came downstairs, she was still in a really good mood. She came up to me and Sammi and kissed us both. She had to leave for work, but she helped get Emma to school before she took off.

Maybe it's just the lack of sleep, but I think I may have overreacted last night. Jenna was pissed off, but because of the swap,

her talk with Amanda didn't have its intended impact. She thinks my wife knows, so she has no reason to tell her again. I've also been checking my email and texts. There is nothing new or suspicious. I even sent her an email from my account apologizing for last night and telling her that I would be really busy for the next couple of days. I'm hoping that if I can ride out the clock long enough, I'll be able to protect Amanda from the truth.

I'm starting to feel less guilty and let myself enjoy Amanda's affection. I think that tonight will be the night that I get to have sex again and I'm excited. Now, I just have to make it through today.

I know I can do this. I'm a grown man trapped in a woman's body, but I still have all the abilities I've always had. How hard can it be? Amanda walked me through the details over the weekend. All I have to do is take a shower, put my hair in a ponytail, put on makeup, pick out clothes, and get dressed.

Oh yeah, I have to do all this while keeping Mady and Sammi from killing each other. The very thought of getting Amanda dressed and pulled together for the day is daunting, but I feel up for the challenge. What choice do I have?

Rooting through the racks of clothes she has in the closet is taking forever, I should have had her pick out something before she left for the office, now I have to wing it. After a few minutes, I decide to put this off until after my shower.

I put Sammi down to nap about ten minutes ago. According to Amanda, that should give me thirty-minutes to shower before I have to get her. Mady is lying on our bed watching cartoons. I make a mental note to never criticize Amanda for putting the kids in front of the television again. Screw the research. This is survival.

"Hey, Mads," I say, "will you be a good girl and watch TV while Dad... er... um...I mean, Mommy takes a shower?"

She doesn't look away from the television set. I take this as a "yes" and head into the bathroom. I strip down and spend a few minutes looking at my wife's body in the mirror. Very nice. I'll have to spend some more time on this when I get a chance. I'm tired of just looking. I want to touch. I pull myself away from the mirror and jump in the shower.

Oh crap. I forgot to put my hair up and now it's wet. Amanda specifically instructed me to keep it dry so I didn't have to worry about blow drying and flat ironing (whatever that means). Oh well, I guess I'm just going to have to roll with it. I grab a bottle of

fruity smelling shampoo. I am a bald man and I have been a bald man since my early twenties. The small amount of hair I grow, I shave off. I have not used any hair product (let alone one that smells like strawberries) in years. Even on the odd occasion when I have to give my daughters a bath, I don't really wash their hair. I just make it wet and tell their mother it's clean.

I take a little bit of the shampoo and rub it into Amanda's long brown hair. My God, does she ever have a lot of hair. I quickly realize that I don't have anywhere close to the amount of shampoo I'm going to need. I take the cap off the bottle and dump a bunch directly onto the crown of my head. I start to lather. The shampoo seems to expand like spray foam insulation. I guess I overdid it because there is shampoo everywhere. I try to rinse it out, but the water just seems to make more lather. I hear Mady at the door. "Mommy, the baby is awake. I get her?"

Uh oh. "No Mads, leave her in the crib, I'll be out in a few minutes," I can't open my eyes there's too much soap and it's burning.

"But she cryin'." Mady is getting demanding.

"It's okay, baby. Watch your show for just a little longer while Mommy washes the soap from her hair."

"My show is over. I want Sammi to stop," Mady whines.

Now, what the hell do I do? I have to make sure Mady doesn't get her sister out the crib. I decide to abort the shower mission and just get out now. I know there's still some soap in my hair, but how bad could it be?

I hop out of the shower and grab my robe and a towel. I wipe off my face. My eyes are still scorched from the shampoo, but I suck it up. I pick up Mady and head to the nursery.

"Your hair smells pretty. I want to taste it." Mady takes a big hunk of Amanda's hair and puts it in her mouth. She quickly realizes this is a bad idea and spits it out. "YUCK!" she screams. "You hair does NOT taste good."

"I know, baby. It's the shampoo."

"Why does it smell good and taste BAD? That's not fair," she whimpers, rubbing her tongue with her tiny hands.

"I know. I agree." We're in the baby's room and Sammi is not happy. Clearly, she has been crying for a while now. I feel like a failure. She's supposed to nap for forty-five minutes. She was hardly down for twenty. How does Amanda keep these little miscreants on such a strict schedule?

"Hey, baby," I coo as I sit Mady on the glider and go over to the baby. "It's all right. I'm going to get you." She cries harder. I'm terrible at this. Just then I catch a glimpse of myself in the dresser mirror. What have I done to my beautiful wife? I look like something out of a demon possession movie. My eyes are beet red and watering and big chunks of my hair are stuck together in soapy glops. No wonder the baby is scared. I look scary.

"Hey, Mady." I decide I need to do some damage control. "Stand here by the crib and play peek-a-boo with Sammi, okay?"

"Not okay," says Mady. "I want to be with you." She gets up and grabs onto my leg. At least she's not scared by my appearance. "I love you Mommy, even though you are my other mommy."

That again? I thought she forgot about that. I ignore it. "That's sweet, Mady, but Mommy needs your help. Will you please watch your little sister? Please?"

"Okay, but I want a dollar."

Three-year-old extortionist. Clearly, this is not the first time she's been paid. I make a mental note to ask Amanda how much she money she gives her.

"Okay, I'll give you a dollar." I really don't have a choice, I need some help. I run out of the nursery and back into the bedroom. First, I need to do something about my eyes. I need to see. I grab Amanda's contacts and carefully take one out of the case. I've seen her do this more times than I can count. It should be easy. I put my finger up to my eye and scream in pain.

"Mommy? You okay?" I hear Mady ask from the nursery.

No, I'm not okay. My eyes are made of napalm. "Yeah, baby. Just keep watching your sister. I'll give you a dollar."

"Okay." I hear her singing to her sister, "Dollar...da-da-da-dollar...da-da-da-dollar."

The contacts are not going to work. I grab Amanda's glasses and put them on. They are a little bent, but at least I can see again. My eyes burn. There is nothing I can do about this. I'm just going to have to wait it out.

Next is the hair. I look at the hair in the mirror. There is no more visible soap. However, the clumps are still a problem. I grab one of Amanda's brushes and try to run it through the mess. I can't even get it past the scalp. This is not good.

I decide to skip the brushing and go straight for the ponytail. I use my hands to pull it back the best that I can. Instead of fight-

ing the clumps, I try to make them work for me. I'm making some progress. It's lumpy, but it all seems to be back and I can secure it with one hand. I look for something to tie it with. Amanda uses these brown rubber-band type things, but when I try to secure it, it's too loose. How does she move her hand to get it tight?

I know the rubber-band thing won't last by itself. I was barely able to get it on and I have no idea how to make it tight. I go to my dresser and see some old shoelaces in the top drawer. This should work. I put the shoelace around the hair and use my teeth to hold one end and my free hand to pull the other until I'm sure the hair is staying in. After I free both hands I'm able to tie a nice bow around the mound of hair. I look in the mirror. It's all out of my face and relatively secure, and even though it doesn't look very polished, I've decided it will have to do.

I go back to the nursery.

"Where's my dollar?" Mady holds out a hand to collect.

"It's in Mommy's room. Let's go get it."

I pick up the baby who seems to be fascinated by the shoestring hair tie and we head back to my room. I grab four quarters from the change jar. Mady is incredulous. "A dollar is paper. This is not paper."

"It's four quarters." I'm pleased to be teaching my daughter a little math. "Four quarters equal one dollar."

"No, a dollar is paper," she repeats. "I want paper." She throws the quarters on the floor.

"Okay." I pick up two of the quarters and surrender the other two to the space underneath the dresser. I want to cry, this is really hard. "I'll give you a paper dollar when we get downstairs. Deal?"

She's back on my bed. She doesn't answer because a new cartoon has come on and she's fixated. Hallelujah.

I set Sammi on the floor and she immediately starts to crawl around the room. She makes her way over to a basket of clean laundry. I let her pull out some t-shirts to chew on.

Now, I need to get dressed. I go to Amanda's dresser and look for some underwear. I find a nice black and red lacy thong I got her for Valentine's Day a year ago. I put it on. It's a little tight, but when I see it in the mirror I can't resist. I grab a pair of white gym socks and an NOU Fighting Wildebeests Basketball Championship T-shirt. I got it for her a few years ago when I first got the job,

but she hardly ever wears it, so it looks brand new. Now all I need is pants. I find a pair of tight black yoga pants that Amanda wears around the house. I put them on. Not bad I think to myself. The hairstyle is growing on me. I put on Amanda's gym shoes and the girls and I head downstairs.

"Dollar?" Mady holds out a hand as soon as we get to the kitchen.

"Dollar." I go to Amanda's purse and get out a nice crisp one dollar bill. The kid has earned it.

I manage to convince Mady that another bowl of cereal is just as good as the hot food her mother makes. It takes me another dollar, but I don't know what else to do. Besides, I can always get the dollars back when she's not paying attention. What does she need all this money for anyway?

I feed the baby cereal. It doesn't look appetizing to me, but she eats it. After we finish breakfast, we spend the rest of the morning playing. By about 11:30, I am thoroughly exhausted. This takes a lot of energy. Where does it all come from? I really love my kids and I'm actually enjoying spending time with them, but they just do not stop moving.

Not only does Amanda watch the kids, but she also manages to clean the house, and do laundry, and all the other little things, too. I look around and see that the house is completely trashed. There are toys everywhere and at least half of the food I've tried to feed the girls is on the floor. I feel like a fuck up. I never feel this way at work. I miss my job. I wish I was there right now.

Just then, Amanda's phone rings. I look at the screen and see it's my sister, Jackie. I feel a rush of love course through my feminine body. I feel an urgent need to talk to my little sister.

"Jacks," I say, probably a little too loud and desperately.

"Jacks? Since when do you call me Jacks?"

Oh shit, Jacks is her childhood nickname, I'm the only person who still calls her that. "Oh, I was just talking to Chris this morning and he told me to call you that," I try to cover. "I told him it was stupid. How are you?" Time to change the subject.

"Chris is a dork." I'm a little hurt. "I hate that nickname. It makes me sound like a terrier puppy. Anyway, I've been trying to call you all weekend. What's going on? I'm going through Amanda withdrawal."

"I misplaced my phone. I just found it this morning." I hate lying to her, but she did call me a dork.

"It doesn't matter. I'm just calling to make sure we're still on for tonight. Bobby is looking forward to watching the game with Chris and I want to catch up with my favorite sister-in-law."

I have no idea what she is talking about. Amanda didn't say anything to me about having dinner with my sister and Bobby. "You know what, let me talk to Chris and make sure we're still okay for dinner. He's been working a lot of nights lately. He wants to impress everyone so he'll get to be department chair."

"All right, but call me right back."

"Okay, I'll talk to you in a few minutes. Bye."

"Bye." She hangs up and I call Amanda.

Chapter 30

Amanda as Chris

I've only been here a few hours, but it has been a whirlwind. It takes so much out of me to continually act like someone I'm not. I hate trying to impersonate my husband and not screw it up. Not to mention, I had no idea how much energy it takes to deal with all these people with all these problems. The test review last night was a controlled situation. I was able to prepare for who I would see. Chris gave me all the questions and was there to help if I got stuck.

Today, I'm on my own. As soon as I walked into the building this morning, some kid I didn't recognize was totally mad at me for not emailing him back. I texted Chris and he said the kid is always mad about something. I ended up asking the kid, Paul, what was wrong and he told me all about his sick mother. He said that they were about to lose their house. Poor kid. I'm glad I've watched all those episodes of Dr. Margaux. They really helped

me get him to open up. When I told Chris, he wasn't really happy because he said that Paul always has problems like this and if I let him get out of line, then he'll take advantage of me. I know Chris was annoyed, but I think it'll be okay.

The phone rings. It's Chris. "Hey. What's up?"

"Hey. I just got a call from Jackie. She said that we're supposed to go out with her and Bobby tonight. Do you know anything about this?"

Shit. Chris's sister and her husband. I totally forgot we're supposed to meet them tonight at Ruby's. Jackie and I made the plans to catch up last week before this happened, and because the Steelers are playing, Chris and Bobby would watch the game. We try to do this every month or so, but I spaced on it happening tonight.

"I totally forgot. With all this stuff going on, it slipped my mind. I guess that's why Jackie kept calling my cell yesterday. Sorry."

"How are we going to pull this off? My sister knows us better than anyone. She, for sure, will know something is wrong. We're going to have to tell her and then she'll think we're nuts and have me committed. This is not good. Not good at all."

"What if we invite a few more people? That way we won't have to get into any deep conversations."

"I guess that could work. Who do you want to bring?"

"Roxy is always good to go, unless she has to work late. Her number is in my cell. Oh, and tell her to invite Lawrence. If he's there, no one else will get a chance to talk. And, what about your friend Charlie? Didn't you tell me he said he plans to watch the game? I bet he'd go."

"Yeah, it'd be great to see Charlie. It may make me feel a little less disconnected from my life. I don't know how you do this every day. Even when I get to talk to other adults, I can't concentrate on what they're saying because I'm always watching the girls. It's really hard."

"Yeah, but don't you love it when they want you," I'm getting upset thinking of my girls. Missing my girls. "Nothing feels better than holding them when they really need you to hold them."

"It is pretty great," Chris says. "I just never really knew what it's like to be a parent from the moment you wake up until the moment you go to sleep. It's a pretty intense job. I used to think research, teaching and office politics were exhausting, but the university doesn't have anything on my daughters."

I smile. It feels good to be validated. He's a pretty great guy. I'm starting to get emotional and I know I can't have a breakdown at work. If anyone sees Chris crying, they'll think he's gone off the deep end. "Thanks, babe. That means a lot. You know, your job is harder than I thought, too."

"How is it going anyway?"

"It's okay. I've been really busy."

"Don't forget that we agreed you would avoid Jenna," he says. "I don't want any problems when I get back."

"I know. I haven't seen her at all today. If she stops by this afternoon, I'm going to make up an excuse and leave. I won't give her a chance to talk to me." *Geez, he really doesn't think I can handle this.* "Anyway, I'm going to try to catch Charlie before he leaves the building and talk him into going tonight. Wish me luck."

"I'll call Roxy and my sister. We can do this."

"Bye, babe, I love you."

"I love you, too."

As I hang up the phone I realize that I haven't ended a phone call with "I love you" in a really long time. It feels good to say it.

Chapter 31

Chris as Amanda

I'm relieved Amanda has managed to avoid Jenna. If she keeps it up, and we change back soon, I may be able to keep my secret.

I call my sister back and confirm that we're on for tonight. I also tell her about Roxy, Charlie, and Lawrence.

"Lawrence? Why would you bring him? I thought you didn't like him."

Um.. don't I? I can't remember if she hates him. I decide she must not or she wouldn't have wanted Roxy to bring him.

"No, no, he's fine."

"Whatever. I'll see you guys later. Bye."

"Bye."

After I hang up, I look at the clock. The day is getting away from me. I need to get to the grocery store because we have no

milk, bread or fruit. Amanda was just at the store for my mom on Thursday. When she was there, she got some of this stuff, but it's all gone now. Those kids eat a lot for as small as they are. Amanda left me a list and some coupons so I would get the right stuff and stay on budget. I think I'll be able to handle it.

But first, I need to convince Mady to get dressed. I know she's been looking a little crazy lately, but I have a shoestring tied to my hair, so who am I to judge?

"So, Mads," I say nonchalantly. Mady turns her head up from the television and gives me an annoyed look.

"Yes, Mommy."

"We need to go to the grocery store. Do you think you can help me with this?"

"No, I think you should do it because you are the mommy and I am the kid." She gives me a dismissive smile and turns her attention back to the television.

Logical. Okay, I can do logical. "Mommy and kids need to do stuff together, right?"

She ponders my argument before she says, "Yes."

"And kids can do stuff to help their mommies, right?"

"No, mommies do the stuff and the kids watch their shows. I watch my show now." She gives me another dismissive smile. I can tell I'm wearing on her nerves.

I don't have time for this. "I'll give you another dollar." At this rate, I'm going to need to create a budget for my extortion payments.

"I guess it's okay," she says, "but I have a condition."

"The dollar is a condition, Mads." I'm trying to be reasonable.

"The dollar AND the condition."

Where did this kid learn her negotiating skills? "Okay, what is it?"

"I want to pick three things and you will buy them."

"Deal." I act quickly before the terms become too disagreeable.

I get the baby dressed in one of the new outfits Amanda got last week. She looks adorable. Now, I need to dress Mady. Amanda told me to let her pick out her clothes so I do this. She selects a pair of flowered leggings and her sister's Christmas dress from last winter. I consider it a lucky break when she can't find a hat to match. As if we didn't stand out enough with my own wardrobe and hair disaster.

I go to the desk in the living room to grab my keys, phone, and...where's my wallet? Crap. I forgot. I have to get Amanda's purse. I go to the table in the foyer and grab it. I'm surprised by how heavy this thing is. Don't get me wrong. I've picked up her purse before, but it has only been occasionally and I've had my man-strength. I wonder what she has in here that causes the weight. I sit it back down and unload it to have a look. I'm amazed at what I see.

There is a wallet, a full set of makeup in a small pouch, three diapers, and a travel package of wipes, a tampon, four pacifiers, a wallet sized folder of coupons, and store reward cards, five snack size bags of fruit treats, a juice box (no straw), seventeen crayons, a pack of sugar free gum, a fun size coloring book, an on-the-go detergent pen, hand sanitizer, sunglasses, half a bottle of water, nail clippers, tweezers, Band-Aids, a small tube of sun block, two pairs of kids socks, a juice box straw, and a cell phone charger.

No wonder she always has what I need when I ask her for it. This is amazing. I think I'm going to like carrying a purse.

I reload the purse, adding a few things of my own, her cell phone, a candy bar, beef jerky, and some eye drops. I grab the kids and we head out to the minivan. This is going to be a piece of cake.

We pull up outside of the grocery store and I park. I go to the back to get Sammi out of her seat and discover that I forgot to latch the harness on the car seat. I make a mental note to be more careful. This was a major, and potentially dangerous, mistake. There are just so many details to remember.

I pull Sammi out of the seat and grab Mady's hand. While I'm doing this I look over at this quilted shopping cart cover thing that Amanda uses. She keeps it in the minivan and every time she puts the baby in the basket of the cart, she lines it with the cover. It always seems like such a waste of time. Besides, how uncomfortable can a shopping cart ride be? It sounds like fun to me.

When we get into the store I load Sammi into the cart's basket. No problem. She doesn't even seem to notice that I haven't lined her seat with anything. I'm feeling proud of myself for having simplified this task already.

The girls and I move down the produce aisle. We need oranges, apples, bananas, and strawberries, not a problem. I begin to fill up the cart when I notice the prices. No wonder Amanda is always clipping coupons and being careful with money. Fresh

fruit is expensive. I grab the items on the list. Now, to the deli—ham, turkey, and Swiss cheese. Got it. Bread, milk, eggs... check, check, check. We're making good progress when Mady decides it's time to collect the items she shook me down for earlier. "You said I could pick three things, remember?"

"Yes, I remember," I say. "What did you want?"

"I don't know yet." She puckers lips her and tilts her head back. She's thinking hard.

"How am I supposed to let you get three things if you don't know what you want?"

"I'll know them when I see them."

Hmm. Okay, I guess. "Why don't you start here in this aisle, while I get the cereal?" I'm not sure where this is going to go, but I figure it can't hurt. Besides, it could be a fun way to distract her so she doesn't get too bored and act up.

"Okay." She looks around.

I'm trying to figure out the difference in prices and ingredients between the name brand cereals and the generic brand when Mady returns. She is carrying a bottle of wine and a box of tampons. I look around and I don't see these items in our aisle.

"Mady, where did you get these?"

"From here," she motions behind her. "I had to leave my number three thing. Can you help me with it?"

"Sure, but are these the things you really want to buy? They aren't really appropriate for a little kid."

"I'm not buying them for me," she smiles sweetly. "I'm buying them for you."

I feel the corners of my mouth turn up in a smile. How sweet and thoughtful my little girl is. I don't really need these things, but hey, it's the thought that counts, right? And, maybe I do need the wine.

I'm still curious as to where she got them. The mystery is soon solved as I see a slightly overweight woman walk over to us. She looks upset.

She doesn't say anything at first, instead she just looks at me. "Can I help you?"

"Your daughter," she spits the words at us, glaring down at Mady, "took these items," she motions to the tampons and wine, "from my cart."

Oh. So that's where they came from. Oops. "I'm sorry. She's three." I flash her my most charming grin. That should explain it all.

"Well, a three-year-old needs a mother who will watch her, doesn't she?"

"Huh?" The grin leaves my face. The mothers are usually so nice and non-judgmental when the kids act out. I've been out with my girls and the moms always look at me so kindly and help me. Why is this woman being a bitch?

"You should be watching your kids. I don't have time to track down my things after they've been stolen by this little thief." She motions at Mady who is hiding behind my leg looking sheepishly up at the woman. "I'm tired of people like you who don't pay attention. You're a bad mother."

"I'm not a bad mother," I say defensively. "I'm a great mother." I put a protective hand on Mady's head and I look at Sammi who has her mouth on the filthy, exposed bar of the shopping cart. She's gleefully mouthing it and a puddle of drool is beginning to form on the floor of the grocery store. Ah, so that's why Amanda covers it. Not the greatest display for this woman who is insulting me, but I stand my ground. "She's just a little girl. Don't you think it's at all funny that she chose these things from your cart? I mean, she picked out wine and tampons. It's funny." Mady is still clutching my leg.

I'm hopeful she'll see how ridiculous all of this is and laugh, but instead, she says, "Some people were just never meant to be mothers." She walks over to my cart and takes her things.

Now, Mady is angry. "Don't say that to my mommy." Her wrinkled brow and tightly pursed lips show her dismay.

At first, the lady seems a bit taken aback. She didn't expect Mady to talk. I know I should probably tell Mady to back down, but I'm curious to see what she'll do. Besides, why should Mady stay silent? This woman is being ridiculous.

"Little girl, you are naughty and you stole from me. You should apologize." She gives Mady a dismayed look.

"Maybe I was bad, but you bad, too. You said mean things."

"I was simply telling your mother to watch you. I don't have to listen to you talk to me like that. You're just a child."

"I a person. You listen to me. Say sorry to my mommy for being mean."

"I will not." The lady looks at me as if I should do something to stop Mady. I know Amanda would probably be embarrassed and immediately apologize, but I think Mady is right. Just because she's a child, doesn't mean she's not a person and this lady needs to recognize that. Besides, Mady is standing up for her mother and I'm kind of proud of her for this.

"Then you are bad." Mady makes her final judgment. "When you say mean things, you say sorry. You won't do it, so you are bad."

"I am not bad. Your mother is bad." She turns her attention to me, I know I shouldn't, but I'm standing there with a smug smile on my face. "You're lucky I don't report this to the manager."

"What are you going to tell him? You got into a fight with a three-year-old girl who took tampons from your cart? I'm sure you'll look completely sane." The sarcasm drips from my last statement.

She looks like she's going to explode, but instead she just turns around and leaves the store. She doesn't even bother with her cart.

I push Sammi's drooly face off the germy shopping cart handle and pick Mady up into a tight hug. "Thanks for standing up for me."

"Can I have another dollar?"

Chapter 32

Amanda as Chris

I grab lunch at the little café across the street from Chris's building. When I get back, I see Sally eating lunch in the lounge. I decide to go in and say hello. I've met her several times at holiday parties and other campus social events. She's smart and fun to be around. I can see why she's been the department chair for so long.

"Hi, Chris," she says when I come in.

"Mind if I eat lunch with you?"

"No. Join me." She motions for me to sit down.

I pull out my salad and start to pick off the croutons and cheese.

"Ha!" Sally laughs. "I've never seen a guy do that. You trying to lose weight?"

I forgot. It's a habit from all the years of trying to keep my weight under control. I guess now that I'm in his body I could

go wild. He's always eaten a lot more than me and he's managed to stay pretty fit. Besides, he's been loading my body with all the junk food it'll hold, while I've been following my regular eating patterns. Maybe I'll drive through and get a shake on the way home.

"You know, a few pounds wouldn't hurt." I change the subject. "So, Sally, how are things with Oliver?"

She gives me a strange look. "I'm surprised you would ask."

"Why?"

"I thought you didn't like to talk about your personal life at work. You know, professional boundaries."

He doesn't talk about us to his friends at work? I'm a little hurt. "It's cool, Sally. If you don't want to talk, I mean."

"No, it's not that." She bites her lip, like she's not sure if she should talk.

"What is it?" I know I should probably shut up and eat, but I can see that she's in pain.

"I just got off the phone with Oliver and, well, things are not great."

Oh no. Oliver is Sally's partner of ten years and they have adorable twin boys. I just saw them together at the picnic the department hosts at the beginning of the fall semester.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm sure you have better things to do, Chris."

In spite of what she says, I can see that she really wants to talk about this, to open up.

"Don't be silly, Sally. Tell me what's wrong."

"Okay, you asked for it. I guess I could use a guy's perspective anyway."

She's barking up the wrong tree on that one.

"Oliver doesn't want to get married and he said that if I keep pressing the point, then maybe we should consider a little time apart."

"No?" I'm shocked. They have been together a long time and they always seemed happy when I saw them. But, I suppose Chris and I seemed happy to the people who saw us, too. "What are you going to do?" I lean in and put my hand on top of hers.

She looks shocked and pulls her hand back. "I don't know what to do." Her eyes are filling with tears. She grabs a napkin and sticks it under her glasses to dab her eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't want you to see me like this."

"Don't be ridiculous." I move to the other side of the table and sit right beside her. I pull her head to my shoulder and comfort her while she cries. "This is a perfectly natural physiological reaction to the emotions you're feeling."

"Most men hate it when women cry in front of them," she sobs.

"Well, don't you worry about that, I'm not like most men. Go ahead and get it out. I'm here for you."

She continues to cry. When she pulls herself together a bit, she continues. "It's just that when we were trying to get pregnant with the twins, Oliver promised me we'd get married while they were still little. It's just so much easier to make decisions with kids when you have all the legal paperwork in place."

"You're right," I continue to soothe her. "Why's he going back on this now?"

"He says that getting married will make him feel trapped."

"What a dick." I grab a tissue from a nearby box and hand it to her.

"I know." The tears are gone and she's showing some anger. Good, that's the first step. "I'm not trying to trap anyone. I just want us to be a family in every possible way. Is that too much to ask?"

"Sally, you carried two of his babies in your body for nine months. There is nothing you can ask that is too much." I lean back and share her outrage.

She smiles. "Tell that to him."

"I would, but I think it would be more powerful if you said it."

"I've tried, but every time I bring it up he dismisses it as if it weren't important. And now, he's suggesting that we take time apart."

"Sounds like he's taking you for granted."

"Yeah, but what do I do about it?"

"Call him on it. Tell him he shouldn't feel trapped anymore because you are setting him free."

"What? I don't know if I could do that. What if he leaves? My boys would be heartbroken."

"He won't. I've seen him with you and the kids. You're his whole world. He just needs to be reminded of that."

I can sense that she's warming up to the idea. "Are you sure it'll work?"

"No, but I think it will make you feel better. If you feel like you can't ask for what you want because he'll leave you, that's not a very good place for your relationship. At least, this way, you'll know."

"You know what, Chris? You're right." She's regained her composure. "I guess I just needed a man's perspective."

"Any time, Sally."

We finish our meals and Sally goes to her office. I head down the hallway. I'm approaching the door when I see Jenna walking away. I almost call to her to wait, but I remember what Chris said, I'm supposed to avoid her. I have a nagging need to talk to her, but things are great for me and Chris and I don't want to screw that up by causing problems for him at work.

I hang back around the corner until I'm sure she's gone and then go to the office.

Chapter 33

Chris as Amanda

When we get back from the store, I unload the groceries and call Roxy. She doesn't answer. I leave a message telling her to call me back.

About five minutes later I hear a "Hellllloooooo…Mandy… you there?" coming from the door. It's Roxy. When did she start coming into the house without knocking?

"I'm in the living room."

She walks in. "Oh my lord Jesus, what has happened to you? Are you sick? You look like a homeless person."

I'm offended. I know I look a little rough, but not homeless. "No, I'm not sick. I'm okay, just a little extra busy today. I didn't have time for makeup."

"Makeup? I didn't even notice that you weren't wearing makeup. What did you do to your hair and why do you look like

you have pink eye?" She strides across the room and pushes my glasses back to get a good look in my eyes.

I step back and out of her grasp. "Oh, you don't like my hair? I was trying something new I saw in a magazine. I guess it didn't quite work." I'm trying to play it off, but obviously the hair was a little worse than I originally thought.

"No, it didn't. It looks like you have a hedgehog in a noose on top of your head. What magazine were you reading where that was featured?"

Wow. She's rough.

"And, since when do you watch Sports News?" She grabs the remote from the coffee table. "Isn't Dr. Margaux on? I saw you called and I thought it was because you wanted us to watch Dr. Margaux together?"

Oh shit, not Dr. Margaux. What have I done to deserve this? I don't see an out, but I try anyway. "I've just recently started to watch Sports News. I'm trying to expand my horizons."

She laughs. "Don't be silly. It's the episode of Dr. Margaux where she interviews the teenage queens of reality TV. You've been waiting for this since the promos last week." She changes the station.

I hate it when other people touch my remote. I decide to change the subject so I won't kill her.

"I wasn't calling about Dr. Margaux." I'm annoyed she is here and I have to act like Amanda. She doesn't pick up on my hostility. "I was calling because I wanted to know if you want to go to Ruby's tonight with me and Chris, Jackie, and Bobby? You can bring Lawrence."

"You sure? I thought you didn't like him." She is clearly surprised. Judging by Roxy's reaction, I start to think my sister may know something about Lawrence I don't know.

"He's all right," I say. "It'll be fun."

"Okay." She nods her head and I can see that she's warmed up to the idea. "It'll be fun. Now, turn up the volume. It's Hillary from Teenage Cocaine Recovery. She's a complete train wreck, so this should be good."

"Yeah. I'm sure it will be great." I slump down on the couch and don't even try to fake enthusiasm.

Chapter 34

Amanda as Chris

"Hey." I move my hands around awkwardly, not sure where to put them, as I stand in the doorway to Charlie's office. I'm nervous. I've met Charlie a few times and Chris likes him a lot, but I've always had a hard time getting a read on him.

He looks up. "Hey, Claridge, give me a second to finish my thought." He holds up one finger then goes back to typing on the computer.

I busy myself looking around his office. It's the same general size and layout as Chris's office, but the décor is strikingly different. Cleveland Browns poster…Browns pennant…Browns light… Browns calendar…he sure does love the Cleveland Browns. Chris doesn't like the Browns. His favorite team is the Pittsburgh Steelers, but they're both football teams. This is perfect. I'll talk to Charlie about football and we'll be able to bond.

"There." He swivels around in his office chair to face me. "What's up?"

"I really love your Browns clock. Is that new?" I flash him a big genuine smile. I use this trick when I meet a new mom who I want to like me, start out with a compliment. It works every time.

"Fuck you, Claridge. The Browns are going to clean the Steelers clock tonight and then we'll see who has a 'nice clock,'" he says that last part in the sing-songy voice that little kids use to say "neener-neener."

I'm floored. I thought he was supposed to be Chris's friend and he's swearing at me and mocking me. I feel the tears welling in my eyes. Chris didn't tell me he was a jerk. "I'm so sorry," I say trying to fix the situation, "I really didn't mean to offend you."

He looks at me like I'm an alien. "You didn't offend me."

He sure seemed offended.

He looks at me even more intently, "Holy shit, you're not going to cry are you? What the hell is wrong with you, man?"

I am feeling like I need to cry and this big asshole is not making it better with all the insults and profanity. I need to protect Chris's dignity.

"No." I take in a deep breath and clench the muscles in my face to keep the tears away.

Is this what it's like to be a man? Do they constantly push back feelings? It's no wonder Chris gets so worked up when the game is on. It's his only socially acceptable emotional outlet.

"I'm fine." I decide I need to take the offensive. "The Steelers are going to rock your clock tonight."

He narrows his eyes and gives me a strange look. I'm not sure what he's going to do, so I'm relieved when he lets out a hearty laugh. "Rock your clock. Ha! You're a tool."

I'm confused, he's laughing, but he's also continuing the insults. I decide to go with it. "Anyway, I just came to see if you wanted to go to Ruby's tonight to watch the game with me and Amanda and some of our friends, but if you don't want to go, that's fine." I'm being defensive, I backpedal. "If you decide to go, you can bring a date."

"Why wouldn't I want to go? Of course, I'll go. No date, though. I struck out with my dentist's office hotty this weekend. How was your morning?" He changes the subject easily.

"It was all right." I want to leave, it's hard to keep up with his shifting attitude. "There was a little drama with the students, but otherwise it was a nice."

"Did Jenna track you down yet? I saw her a little bit ago and she mentioned that she would be in to see you. I have to leave early, so I won't be there to interrupt your office hours rendezvous," he says with a crude, dirty-old-man wink.

Rendezvous? I feel the same nudge of discomfort as I did last night.

"Okay." I decide to try to get some more information from Charlie. "What do you think I should do when she's there?"

"If it were me I'd hit that. She is totally hot for teacher and she has an amazing ass."

I'm starting to hate this guy. I give him a nasty look.

"Ha! Just kidding, Claridge. Seriously, man. You have it pretty good with Amanda, so you should probably just keep letting Jenna down easy. It may be best if you avoided her all together."

Okay, that's better. "I thought I made it clear to her that I was a happily married man." I'm still digging.

"I don't know if you made it clear enough. You still talk to her on social media and she's in your office almost every day. You need to get some distance. Look, I know it's hard. Jenna really isn't taking the hint and part of the problem is that you are not making it crystal clear."

Charlie stands up and grabs his coat.

"I gotta go," he says. "I'll see you tonight, right?"

"Yeah. Six o'clock?" I get up and walk into the hallway with him.

"Perfect. Later, dude."

"Oh, yes. Later, dude." I smile. Charlie gives me another peculiar look as he heads out the door.

I walk down the hallway to Chris's office. I guess I now know why Jenna was so upset at the test review. Chris was right. She still has a very big crush on him and it must have been hard for her to see me there. *Poor girl.* I remember when I was in college I had a crush on my teacher, Dr. McKendrick. I used to love to listen to him talk about politics in my American government class. It was harmless though. It wasn't that I really wanted him to fall for me, I just thought that being smart made him attractive.

I'm sure that's what is going on with Jenna. She probably got upset that I was at the test review because it ruined her fantasy.

It'll all blow over. I'll make sure I get a chance to talk to her tomorrow and let her down easy. It's actually a good thing that I'm in Chris's body for this, because I can really understand where she's coming from.

Now, I need to get a few things done before I leave for the day. I plan to skip out a little early so I can see Chris and the girls before we leave for the bar.

Chapter 35

Chris as Amanda

I am finally alone in my wife's body with a little time on my hands. I suffered through Dr. Margaux with Roxy. Turns out, it wasn't as bad as I always thought it would be. The girl from Teenage Cocaine Recovery was a total mess, but Dr. Margaux seemed to be able to cut through her bullshit and help her. What may have sounded cruel for the average American came across as no-nonsense straight talk when it was delivered by an attractive older woman with a French accent. I can see why Amanda likes her.

After Roxy left, I took the kids to my mom's for a few hours. I said I was going to run some errands. When I dropped the kids off, my mom acted annoyed. She never acted this way when I dropped them off before the switch.

I'm really irritated about the way Mom mistreats Amanda. The most surprising part of this unhealthy dynamic is Amanda

lets it happen. I know she told me that it's a holdover from when mom was really sick. Even so, the Amanda I know is really not the type of woman who would allow herself to be mistreated.

Ugh! Why am I thinking about my mom right now? I've been waiting for this chance since the first few hours of the change. I'm going to spend a little time looking at my wife's body. It feels a bit creepy to do this without her here, but I asked if I could this morning before she left. I'm not really sure she knew I was serious, but she told me to knock myself out, so long as I remember to do the laundry and clean up the playroom (both of which can wait until I'm done).

I head upstairs to our bedroom. God, it's quiet here without the kids. I take off my shirt first and there they are. I am an evolved man with a Ph.D. and a research agenda, but when I see those big beautiful breasts in the mirror, all I can think is boobies, boobies, boobies. It's like I'm twelve years old. Then I take off my pants and check out that fabulous ass in the mirror. It looks great in those black and red underwear. They are incredibly uncomfortable. I've been picking wedgies since I put them on, but they make Amanda's ass look unbelievable, so it's totally worth it.

I tell my wife all the time I love her body, but she doesn't believe it's possible. She's so caught up in the fact that she's bigger than she was in college. Instead of seeing a great curvy body, my wife sees cellulite and fat. Don't get me wrong, I see the cellulite too, but I don't really care. I didn't even care when I was twenty. Girls all think that guys can't stand to look at cellulite, in reality, I don't think I've ever seen a girl, outside of airbrushed in magazines, that doesn't have cellulite.

I'm just happy to see a naked woman in the flesh. I could look at her naked body all day long. She really turns me on. I love that she's soft and warm and smells like the same perfume she's been wearing since I met her. Being in her body has given me an opportunity to really take it all in. I don't have to leave her shirt on, or turn out all the lights, or promise to hide my face when she walks out of the room. I'm in charge and I get to see everything.

Looking at her naked turns me on and I spend some time touching her body. I try to replicate the moves I've been using for years and immediately determine the ones that work and the ones that are not quite right. I rub and I flick and it feels really great. It's not the same sort of intensity I feel in my penis, but when I finally

get there, it's incredible. After I'm done, I lay in the bed for a few minutes composing myself. I think to myself that this is going to be very useful information if we ever figure out how to get back into our own bodies. I am going to be a much better lover now that I have firsthand experience.

Reluctantly, I put my robe on. I figure I'll get more time later tonight after the kids are asleep. I'm going to try to work this in whenever I can. I'm sure Amanda was ready to have sex with me last night, and I hope she feels the same way tonight. Maybe it's because I'm a guy, but I'm really excited to have sex with myself in my wife's body. It's strange knowing that I'll be able to touch my own body in ways that I know will make her crazy. I smile just thinking about it.

But before any of this can happen, I have a lot to do. First, get a second shower. Roxy and my mom made it clear that my hairstyle and clothing choices would not do. What was it Mom said? I look like I need to "have my head mowed to harvest the hay." She used to live on a farm. I'm not exactly sure what an unharvested field of hay looks like, but I know it's not an acceptable look for Amanda.

The good news is I don't have the girls around to rush my shower this time. In fact, maybe I'll take a bath and spend some more time figuring out how to please my wife's body. Yes, that is exactly what I need to do. I head into the bathroom feeling pretty good about the whole thing.

Shortly after I get into the bath, I come crashing back to reality when there is a call from my mom.

"Amanda," she says. "You need to come get the children now. My nerves just can't take this. You said you'd be gone for an hour. It's been an hour and a half already." She's right, but before when I've dropped off the kids she's never been in a rush for me to come get them.

"Okay, I'll be over in a few minutes."

"Really, honey. You have to stop leaving the kids with me so much. I'm too old for this. Oh, and when you're here do you think you could carry my winter clothes down from the attic. I need to switch out for the season." Wow, one minute my mom is berating Amanda for being inconsiderate, the next she's asking for a huge favor. I don't know how Amanda reacts to this, but I'm not happy about it.

"Why don't you ask Chris to help?"

"Amanda, honey, we've been through this. Chris has an important job and he has to work hard so you can afford to stay at home and not work. He doesn't have time for this stuff. You're the one without a job. You're supposed to be the one to help me."

"I do work, Linda." I don't even try to hide the annoyance in my voice. "I work hard taking care of your son and his children. I work hard cleaning the house and I work hard doing errands for my mother-in-law. I'd appreciate it if you didn't imply that my job was any less important than Chris's job. I'll be over to the get girls in a few minutes and I promise, I won't ask you to help me with them again."

I hang up the phone without saying good-bye and head over to my mom's house. It felt good to defend Amanda. She does work hard and it's about time we all recognized that.

Chapter 36

Amanda as Chris

I left work early today, right after the three o'clock office hour was over. I was hoping to get back in time to help Chris with the kids, but when I called him, he said he was on his way over to his mother's house to "deal with her." I hope he doesn't completely wreck my relationship with her. I don't want there to be discord.

Now, I'm alone with some unexpected down time. When I'm home with the kids, I never get down time, so it's hard for me to relax. I decide that the best way to spend this time is by fixing some of Chris's most obvious grooming problems.

Don't get me wrong, I've always been physically attracted to Chris. Since the first day at that party when he hit on me while his girlfriend was in the other room, I've thought he was sexy. He has great legs and a handsome face. His face is my favorite part. It's kind, but with an edge that makes him look strong and manly.

He's also confident and self-assured, two things that really turn me on. In addition to this, his looks have held up well as he ages. He's a little thicker in the middle than he was when we met, but overall, it's good.

This is not to suggest, however, that there aren't some things I would change. First up, those feet are disgusting. He has the fingernails and toenails of a large koala bear and even though I've been aggressively pumicing every night, I've barely made a dent on his callouses. Also, he seems to have hair in all the wrong places. There is so much hair. If he were a cat, the hairballs would be the size of basketballs.

Since I have a little extra time on my hands before we go to Ruby's, I decide to give Chris a small makeover. Nothing dramatic. A few plucks here, a couple clips there, and he'll be ready for the runway.

I stand naked in front of the bathroom mirror. I immediately notice something odd. Oh, no, not another hard on! I thought I took care of that when I went to the bathroom this morning. How many of these things does he have a day? Is there any way to predict when one might happen, like an early warning system or something? Why is he having an erection this time?

I decide to touch it before I do anything else. I don't know why, it just seems like the thing to do. Of course, touching leads to light caressing. The next thing I know, I'm lying on the bed masturbating. It doesn't last long and when I'm done I realize it's made a little bit of a mess. I clean it up with tissues and decide to put on a pair of underwear before this thing comes to life again.

"Wow," I say aloud. It seems as though every little thing arouses this guy. I didn't even mean for that to happen. It's no wonder he's so damn horny all the time.

But this isn't even what I was here to do. I was here to give Chris all the fixes he's needed, but won't do for himself. Sure, I've dropped hints to him. "Hey, Chris, why not pluck those long eyebrows?" or "Chris, you know birds are looking to nest in those ear hairs," or "Chris, did you just get back from a comic book convention? I think someone wants his hobbit feet back." He's always been oblivious to my not-so-subtle hints.

As I gaze at his body in the mirror, I lift the arms and expose a large nest of armpit hair. "Gross," I exclaim jumping backwards a little bit. I've seen it before, but it's seems even more aggressive now that I have to deal with it.

We keep professional-grade hair clippers in the cupboard above the sink. In the bag are clipper guards, cleaning oil, and a small comb. I decide to attach a large guard to the clippers. They vibrate in my hand and I run the head over the hair on my underarms. Large patches of hair fall to the sink. "Ew," I yell out, as if expecting some different result. I decide that the large guard is leaving too much hair. I want a cleaner look. I keep getting closer and closer until I go for broke and before I know it, Chris doesn't have any armpit hair. Oops.

After the armpits are clean, I go back to a medium sized guard and fix up his chest and pubic hair. Much better. As I'm finishing up in the pubic area I realize that the penis is starting to grow again. Really, Chris? Constant erections? I pull the underwear back up and think about Linda. I'm pleased that this ends the erection. It's useful, and a relief to know that mentioning his mom can instantly turn him off.

I clean up the mess I've made in the bathroom and get ready for the rest of Amanda's beauty shop. I begin with the eyebrows and move on to the ear hair. When I'm done, Chris looks a lot less hairy and I am satisfied with the result.

Now, what to wear? I go into Chris's closet and see all the stuff he usually wears, I push it to the side and look for some of the items I know I've bought him through the years that he doesn't wear too often. This is fun. I'm used to picking out clothes for girls, but I rarely get the chance to dress a boy.

I've just started trying on outfits when Chris calls. He's running late with his mom and says he'll meet me at Ruby's.

Chapter 37

Chris as Amanda

When I get over to my mom's apartment I'm fully ready to have it out with her. Her problem is with me, not with Amanda, and this nastiness between the two of them has to end.

On my way over, I stopped at Emma's school and picked her up. She goes in and says "hi" to her grandmother. My mom pulls Emma in for a big hug. I've always loved to see my girls with their grandma. That was one of the reasons I looked for a job that was close to where Mom and Jackie lived. I wanted everyone to be close. It seems like that plan may be backfiring.

After Emma hugs my mom, she joins Mady who is playing with dolls. Sammi is taking a nap. "Don't take off your jacket, Ems, we're leaving soon," I yell down the hall.

"Okay, Mom," she yells back.

"Hi, Linda." I'm impressed with the icy tone I'm able to eke out of Amanda's vocal cords. "I'll just pack up the kids' things and we'll be on our way. It'll only take a few minutes."

I've already called another girl who lives in the neighborhood. She's babysat for us before. I look at my mom and her face is screwed into the same angry scowl she used to shoot at me when I was a naughty little boy. I'm not sure how to proceed. This can't go on. She has to be nicer to Amanda, especially if I'm stuck being Amanda, but I'm afraid I won't be able to confront my own mother.

I take a deep breath and dive in. "Don't look at me like that, Linda." I'm sick of the manipulation. "I'll be out of your hair in a few minutes."

"Good."

I stop packing and just stare at her for a few seconds.

"What?"

"Why do you talk to me like that?"

"Why honey, I don't know what you mean. How is it that I talk to you?"

"You do know what I mean. I try to be kind to you and I spend a good part of my life picking up your prescriptions, and groceries, and doing all kinds of chores around your house, and you are consistently nasty to me. Why?"

"Well, I'm sorry that helping me has been such a burden." She's angry and trying to make the conversation all about her. "You really don't need to hurl accusations at me. I think that maybe I should call Chris and tell him that you think it's appropriate to be cruel to his mother."

Does she really think I'm that easy to manipulate? "Tell Chris whatever you want. I think he has his own ideas about the way you treat me. He knows that you don't respect me and that you consistently are ungrateful for all the work I do. As a matter of fact, why don't we call him right now and you can tell him what you think of me." I pull out my cell phone.

I look over and see that my mom is terrified that I'll follow through on my threat. *Good.*

"I'm sorry."

"I don't care...." Wait a minute. "Sorry for what?" I'm curious. I didn't expect her to be sorry, I expected her to be nasty. I want to hear what she has to say.

Her anger has turned to sadness and I immediately feel terrible. Seeing my mom's quivering lips makes me feel like a bad little boy who brought home an F on a test.

"I know I haven't always been very nice to you, Amanda. And, I'm sorry." I really believe she means it. I sit down on the couch next to her. She looks at me and keeps going. "When I'm doing it, you know, being mean, I don't really see it, but afterwards, I know I've hurt your feelings and I regret it."

"You should. I feel like you don't like me."

"I do like you, I really do. We've spent so much time together and you've always been there for me. You're a good wife to my son and a good mother to his children. In a strange way, that's part of the problem."

"How so?" Is she crazy? How could Amanda being a good wife and mom be a problem?

"When I came here, I thought that you'd all need me to help. I thought that Chris would need me and we'd get to spend time together again. Then I got sick and it's you who has to help me. I feel useless. Chris doesn't think I'm helpful at all. I try so hard to get on his good side and I've been mistreating you so I would look better in his eyes. I take my frustrations out on you." Oh, so now it's all my fault. Thanks, Mom.

"Don't pin this on Chris." I've gone from defending Amanda to defending myself.

"I'm not trying to pin anything on Chris." Her features have softened in defeat. "It's not his fault either."

"You're damn right it's not."

"I just don't feel like he has a lot of time to spend with me and I've become resentful. Jackie doesn't really come around much either. It makes me sad that my kids don't like to spend time with me. I thought that when we all lived here, in the same place, we could be a family. Instead, I'm just a burden and you're the one who is assigned with taking care of me."

I didn't realize she was so lonely. "I don't think of you as a burden, well, at least most of the time I don't." I give her a smile and she returns it. "I'm happy to help you when you need me and you help us, too, you know. You watch the girls. They love you. So do Chris and Jackie, I'm sure they'd both help more if we asked them to."

"I guess I know that. It would be a big help if *you* would ask them to step in more, you're the gatekeeper. I appreciate all you've

done for me. Every time I'm nasty to you, I regret it, then I try to be overly sweet and end up overcompensating. Chris is supposed to be the one who answers my calls and helps me out, but you're the only person I can get to talk to me."

"Yes, he is, but he's really busy."

"I know and I guess I figured that if I made you mad enough, you'd quit helping me, and Chris or Jackie would be forced to do it. But, no matter how much I push you around, you still answer my calls and help me out. You're always kind to me, but I miss my own kids. You're a mother, you must understand." She's using my sympathies and her own sadness to implore me to feel for her.

Well, I've only been a mother for about three days, but I think I do understand and I feel very guilty.

"I guess I get it and I'm sorry, mm.. oh, Linda," I'm so caught up in what she's saying that I nearly call her mom and, shit, I just apologized for Chris, but I'm Amanda, "I guess I should, um, not answer your calls anymore?" I'm stuck so I have to say something, but I'm not sure what she wants me to say. I don't know if Amanda would want to get completely out of the situation, or if she just wants mom to be nicer.

"Don't be silly, Amanda. It's my fault our relationship has gotten bad and I'm going to change. You and I should be on the same side. I know you want Chris to work less and be home more. We need to work together and convince him."

How do these women expect anyone to pay for stuff if I'm at home all the time trying to meet their emotional needs? "Well," I say, "I'm sure Chris would be sorry if he knew you were so upset. But, he still has to work." She looks upset. "But...I think if you tell him how you feel he'll try to be more...available?"

"Yeah, he'd say that, but as soon as things got busy, he'd get distracted and push everything on to you again. He always does this."

Do I? I try to do what's right, but Amanda, and Mom, and the kids require a lot of attention. It's just easier to let Amanda deal with it all, but I don't want my neglect to come between her and my mom. Besides, now that I've gotten a taste for all that Amanda does, I can see that it really is a lot. I should help out more with mom. I feel a fresh wave of guilt as I think of Jenna. If I weren't so busy texting her and calling her, maybe I'd know what was happening in my own family. I guess I have always been distracted and Jenna is just the latest distraction.

"I know Chris tries," I say weakly. "And, I'll talk to him and ask him to try harder."

"I'm happy to hear that. I'm sure if we're both on the same side, we can change him." She's practically beaming.

I will be more available to help Amanda with my mom, but I need to make something clear to her. "Look, Linda, I appreciate the apology, and I'm happy to keep helping you when you need me, but I don't want to work with you to change Chris. He's going to have to decide to do that on his own."

I try to put this back onto me. It's not fair for my mom to ask Amanda to change me. I'm the only person who can do that. Well, if I'm in my own body, I'm the only person who can do that.

"I will be nicer to you. I'm glad we finally had this talk, Amanda. Chris is lucky to have you."

I know my mom is right, I try to push all this responsibility off on Amanda and for some reason she lets me do it. I'm fortunate that I have her and I plan on spending the rest of my life making sure she knows it. I'm done with Jenna and I'm going to make sure Amanda is done with the idea of divorce. I'm going to be a better son and take some of the pressure off my wife.

"Thanks, m..., uh, Linda." Talking to my mom makes it hard for me to remember I'm in Amanda's body. I give her a hug.

"And, I'm glad that you are finally standing up for yourself. I've been wondering when you would."

"I've been wondering the same thing," I mutter.

"Huh?"

"Nothing."

"One more thing."

"Yeah, what's that?"

"Will you leave the kids with me tonight while you go out with Chris and Jackie? I get lonely and the kids are fun to have around. I just asked you to take them home to try to mess up your plans with Chris. I was jealous, but I'm not anymore." Well, it's a little creepy that she would try to mess up our date night, but she's clearly repentant and I don't want to fork out the money for a baby sitter.

"Sure, Linda. I'm glad we had this talk."

I decide to stick around for another hour and talk to my mom. I call Amanda and the babysitter and change the plans again.

My mom has an easy rapport with Amanda and I realize that they spend a great deal of time together—much more than I ever

would have guessed. Mom tells Amanda a story about my aunt and sister then talks about her latest doctor's appointment. I get so wrapped up in catching up with her I'm surprised when I look at the clock and realize I need to go. We're supposed to meet for dinner at six o'clock and I have an important appointment to keep before I see Amanda tonight.

Chapter 38

Amanda as Chris

After about a half an hour, and more outfits than I can count, I feel like Chris looks pretty good. He could use a professional manicure and pedicure (I don't think I'll ever get those feet to look like they belong on a human being). Otherwise, he looks very nice.

I grab Chris's wallet from the dresser. I've found that I really don't like carrying a wallet. I need a purse. A wallet doesn't have enough room for all my necessities. Also, I have to jam the thing in my pocket and it creates an unsightly bulge. If I stay in this body for very long I'm going to have to break down and purchase a nice man satchel.

I head out the door and down the street to Ruby's. I thought about driving, but realized that I'll be expected to drink with the guys tonight, so I don't want to take the car. Besides, it's a nice day and I don't mind the walk.

When I get to the bar, I smile at the hostess. As usual, I'm the first to arrive. I ask for a table for the seven of us. I've seen this girl here before. She's cute and young. Probably in her early twenties. She's never paid a lot of attention to Chris when we were here as a family, but I notice that she's taking a little extra time to seat me, and she's smiling more. I guess the makeover turned out better than I thought. She takes me to a table towards the back. I'm only there for a few minutes before Charlie shows up.

"Hey, Claridge," he says. "What happened to you?"

"What do you mean?" I shoot him a coy smile and pretend to play it off.

"You look... different." He gives me a curious once over. "I can't quite put my finger on it, but something is different. You just look a little, um, cleaner, or something."

I'm not exactly sure what he means by that, but I take it as a compliment. "Thanks, I gave myself a little makeover after work." I stand up and give a little twirl so he can see the whole transformation.

"Huh! A makeover! Whatever, dude." He laughs. "You really are acting goofy today. You're not yourself."

He has no idea.

"Did the makeover require you to leave that God awful Steelers' jersey at home?"

Oh no. He's right. I forgot that Chris always wears his old, beaten up jersey when he watches the games. His dad bought it for him to where to the first game they went to together. The Steelers won that game and he hasn't washed it since. "Yeah, I must have."

Chris is going to kill me. It doesn't make sense, and Chris knows it doesn't make sense, but in his mind, he believes wearing that jersey can change the outcome of a football game. I've seen him spend hours searching for it at the beginning of the season and it hasn't been washed since 1997.

I was so caught up in choosing the right button-down and clipping his nose hair, that I forgot something that is important to him. Guilt washes over me. Besides, if making a wish can cause me to change bodies with my husband, maybe an old jersey is responsible for the good fortune of the Pittsburgh Steelers.

I'm contemplating a trip home to get the jersey when Jackie and Bobby show up. They've met Charlie a couple of times at var-

ious events so Bobby and Charlie easily strike up a conversation about the game.

"Hey, big brother," Jackie pulls out the chair next to mine. "You look especially dashing tonight. Where's Amanda?"

"Thanks, Jackie. She's meeting us here," I say. "She was over at Lin..er..Mom's with the girls."

"Of course she's with Mom." Jackie rolls her eyes. "She's always with our mom."

"Yeah," I say uneasily. I'm not sure where this is going.

"You know, Chris, I'd like to ask Mom to spend time with Jaycee and Ethan once in a while." Jaycee and Ethan are my niece and nephew.

"So ask her."

"I would, but she's always busy with your kids and with Amanda. It's hard for me to figure out how to have a relationship with Mom when Amanda is always around acting like the perfect daughter-in-law."

I'm floored. I had no idea Jackie felt this way. She's never said anything to me.

"I'm quite sure Amanda would appreciate it if you were more involved with Mom. It's not easy for her to always be the one who is on call," I say. "I'm sure Amanda would be happy if you were to do Mom's shopping, clean her house, run her erran-"

She cuts me off. "Come on, Chris. Don't be defensive. You know I love Amanda and appreciate all the help."

That's better.

"I can't help but wish Amanda wasn't quite so perfect and available," she says. "Anyway, I know I'm being spoiled. Let's talk about something else. How are my beautiful nieces?"

I launch into the story about Mady and the lady at the grocery store, but in my mind I'm trying to process the information Jackie has just shared. Is this how she sees me? Am I the "perfect" daughter-in-law? I don't feel perfect. I decide that if Jackie wants me to back off, I can easily back off. In fact, I'd love to. I'm just finishing my story when I look up and see myself walk into the restaurant with Roxy and Lawrence. I cannot believe what I'm wearing.

Chris has my body decked out in a very tight black dress I don't recognize. But, I do know it's not a dress I would ever wear, especially not to a sports bar on game night. What was he thinking? He turns around.

Oh.

My.

God.

I see back fat. The dress looks okay from the front, but the extra fat around my shoulders gets pushed out on the back by my bra. The least he could have done was grab a little sweater to give me some camouflage. I'm mortified. I feel my face getting hot.

"Oohlala." Jackie smiles excitedly. She runs up and gives Chris a hug. "You look terrific. I love those shoes." He pops a foot out so she can get a closer look.

I hadn't noticed the shoes, which is incredibly weird because they are three-inch leopard print high heels. How the hell is he walking in those? I'm not sure I could walk in those, but he's prancing around the table like he's been wearing them his whole life.

"How did this happen?" Jackie's still buzzing around Chris, examining the new look. "Did you go to the spa for a head-to-toe makeover?"

"I did it." Roxy is beaming. She loves the attention.

"I helped," chimes in Lawrence who is standing by Roxy nodding his head in approval.

"Yes, he did." She gives Lawrence a big, conspiratorial smile. "Mandy looked horrible today, so when she asked me for a makeover, I knew I would be able to fix her. Now, she is beautiful. No more mommy jeans and ponytails. She is gorgeous."

Uh oh. I feel the tears again. Everyone thought I looked horrible before and I think I look fat now. Lawrence gave me a makeover and he's laughing at how ugly I was.

"I did look bad this afternoon," Chris says. He looks directly at me and says, "I had a lot of trouble with my hair this morning, but I didn't want the makeover because of that." He walks over and puts an arm around my waist. "I just guess I felt like it may be cool to mix things up a little bit. You know, to let my hair down. Literally."

The crowd laughs approvingly.

Chris looks at me and gives me a big smile. "What do you think, Chris?" He emphasizes his own name for my benefit. The tears retreat. I guess I don't look too bad. My hair looks kind of good down around my shoulders. It takes a lot of time to make it look like that, so I usually just throw it up in a ponytail.

"I think you look... great."

Everyone else seems impressed, including Charlie, who leans into me and whispers, "Dude, your wife is hot." Maybe I misjudged him earlier.

Chapter 39

Chris as Amanda

At first she looks like she's gonna make me cry...here at Ruby's...on game night. I see my face flush and my eyes start to shine. This could be really bad. I step in and try to make her feel better and, after a few minutes, Amanda warms up and finally looks impressed by the makeover.

I know I *feel* sexy. If I were a woman, I would totally dress like this all the time. Sure, the underwear are uncomfortable (I never even heard of shapeware until an hour ago, but evidently the girls love them) and the shoes are tight, but they make Amanda's legs look incredible. When Roxy put on the makeup and styled Amanda's hair, it made me feel pampered and adored.

Lawrence kept bringing me glasses of champagne and walking around telling Roxy what to do. He is really a cool guy. He told stories about his boyfriend, Jonny, who sounds like a total

jerk. I'm sure Lawrence can do better, but he said, "the heart wants what the heart wants," and I can't argue with that.

I was apprehensive when I first met Lawrence because Amanda has always seemed intimidated by or jealous of him, or something, but, after a few glasses of champagne, I found him absolutely charming. I even think he hit on me. I know I'm not an option for him in my current condition, but I swear, he sensed I was a man and he was attracted to me.

Anyway, getting a makeover made me feel pretty. I don't know why Amanda doesn't do this every day.

Then, there are the men. Normally, I'd be annoyed to see men checking my wife out like this, but seeing as though it's for sure not going to lead to anything, I'm finding it kind of fun. There's one guy I know from my old gym. I saw him when we first walked in and he keeps eyeing me up. The guy was a real jerk—the kind of person who used the workout machines and never bothered to clean them off. If I'm feeling it later, I may just flirt with him so I can turn him down. I never realized women had so much power.

I also kind of love Roxy. We had the best time this afternoon. She is a great friend to my wife and I was able to get some more information from her about this whole divorce thing. Turns out she has been trying to convince Amanda to talk to me so we can work on our problems. Roxy mentioned how sad Amanda has been and said Amanda is feeling neglected and overwhelmed by the kids and my mom.

I got more intel on my wife in one afternoon of hair styling and clothes trying on, than I have gotten in the last three years. It was kind of sad at first to think that my wife has an easier time talking to Roxy than she does me, but I guess I have been preoccupied with work and Jenna. I plan on talking to Amanda about all of this later. I want her to know how great she is. That's one of the reasons I did the makeover.

I know Amanda wants us to have fun and I'm going to make sure we have a really great time tonight. I'm going to remind her why we fell in love.

We order beer and lots of food. Amanda shoots me a dirty look, so I ask for a small salad to go with my hot garlic chicken wings and chili cheese fries. I probably won't eat it, but it seems to make her happy.

I lean over and whisper, "Don't worry babe. I haven't eaten much today, besides, have you seen your body? You don't need to be on a diet."

She rolls her eyes, but I can tell that she appreciates the comment.

We sit by each other at the end of the table and let the rest of the gang share jokes and stories while we have a side conversation.

"Okay, so you have to tell me. How are you walking in those shoes? I'm impressed."

"They aren't so bad. The payoff comes when I walk past a mirror and see your legs. They look amazing."

She smiles. "I have to admit, my legs do look pretty great, but that dress...isn't it a bit much for a football game? Where did you get it anyway?"

"Roxy, of course. She's the best. I just put myself, well, yourself"—I smile, sometimes the pronouns are confusing—"in her hands and let her work her magic. It was fun."

"How did you find the time?" she asks. "I thought you were with the kids all day."

"I took them to my mom's house."

Amanda shakes her head and breathes in disapproval. "Wasn't she pissed off? She only takes them for short periods of time, then she gets really tired."

"At first she was, but when I went over this afternoon, I had a little chat with Mom and to make a long story short, I think you are going to have a much better relationship with her."

"My relationship with her isn't bad, Chris." She's still defensive. "I just don't like the way she talks about me behind my back. Otherwise, we get along okay."

I put my hand on top of hers. "No, Amanda, you let her treat you badly and she takes out her frustrations on you. I never realized how bad it was until this week. Now that I know, I'm going to step up and help you more and she told me she will be nicer to you."

Amanda doesn't look convinced, "I don't let her treat me badly. It's just how she is."

"No, it's not. She'd never say those things to me or Jackie. If she did, we'd call her on it. You need to stand up to her. That's the way to make her respect you."

"It's hard for me to say anything negative to her, even though I want to. I still think of her lying in her hospital bed for all those months. I promised myself if she made it through then I'd be here to help her."

"That's great, but she's much better now, and helping her doesn't mean that you have to take abuse from her."

"I guess you're right."

"Of course, I am." She hits my arm playfully to reprimand my bravado. I change the subject. "By the way, you did a nice job with your own little makeover."

She smiles. "You like it? I just did a little clipping and plucking and all the clothes were already there. It's not nearly as dramatic as your makeover."

"I love it," I say. "But you forgot something."

"I know. I'm so sorry. You always wear that dirty old jersey for luck. I was just about to leave to get it when you showed up..." She stops talking because I just pulled the jersey out of my purse.

"I know the secret to your magic now, too. Having a purse is incredible. We just have to figure out who should wear 'ol number 12. Is it more important that it's on my body or is my spirit the key to the good luck?"

Chapter 40

Amanda as Chris

Of course, he remembers to bring that dirty old jersey. I laugh at the absurdity of his question. "Well," I say pretending to carefully consider the question at hand, "what do you think?"

"I think your body looks far too amazing in this dress to cover it up with the jersey. You'll have to wear it." He charms me with a sly smile.

"But you look good, too," I protest. "I love this shirt." I pull on the collar of the dark green and white shirt I'm wearing.

"Yes, I do look very nice, but you wouldn't want to be responsible for the Steelers losing a game to the Browns, now would you?"

"Nope." I'm resigned to the fact that I'm going to have to wear the smelly old thing. Besides it doesn't really bother me and

I love seeing Chris look happy and relaxed. "I'll do anything for the team."

"Amanda, come down here and tell Jackie what you said about Lawrence's boyfriend," Roxy yells from across the table. "Amanda has such a good sense of what men think. It's like, all of a sudden, she can read their minds."

I laugh. It figures. Lawrence likes Chris. Lawrence and I have never really clicked, but one afternoon of mimosas and make-overs and now, we're best buddies. It's the effect Chris has on people. Unlike me, he's very charismatic. It doesn't surprise me that he charmed Lawrence and Roxy.

Chris leans into me, "We'll talk more later?"

"Sure thing. Now, go hang out with your girlfriends and your new best friend, Lawrence. I've got to get ready for the big game anyway." I pull the jersey over my head. It smells like stale beer, and sweat, mixed with Chris's body spray.

"Ugh," says Charlie. "I thought you forgot that shitty, old thing."

Chris looks at me, he can't help himself. "It's not shitty. It's black and gold, now a Brown's jersey, that's the color of shit."

Charlie looks taken aback.

Bobby laughs. "Good one, Amanda. I didn't know you had it in you."

"Yeah," I say. "The little wife has my back tonight." Chris gets up and heads down with the girls and Lawrence. I give him a swat on my behind as he leaves. He looks at me appreciatively.

"Now," I say to Charlie and Lawrence, "who needs another beer?"

They both need a refill, so I head to the bar to get a pitcher. While I'm waiting a woman motions me over. "Stand here," she says. "The bartender will be able to see you better."

"Oh, thanks. That's really kind of you."

"Yes, it is. Why don't you buy me a drink to show your appreciation?"

"Sure thing. What do you like?"

"Whiskey sours." I get the bartender's attention and put in the drink order. I'm standing there waiting when I feel a hand on my back. It moves lower and before I know it, she's got her hand on Chris's ass.

"What are you doing?" I spit the words at her in surprise. "I'm...I'm...m-m-married. Can't you see I have a ring?" I shove Chris's ring under her nose for close inspection.

"I saw it"—she's undeterred—"but, I still think you're cute." She pushes a bar napkin with a number scrawled onto it at me. "Here's my number. If you decide you need a break from your wife, give me a call."

"I will NEVER need a break from my wife." I fume indignantly. I grab my drinks and walk away. Maybe my makeover was a little too good. Perhaps, I should learn to appreciate long nose hair and hobbit feet. They may just be Mother Nature's way of keeping my husband faithful. I have to admit, having that woman hit on my husband made me feel even more attracted to him. It made me feel like protecting my territory.

When I get back to the table, Chris is just finishing some story that makes all the girls and Lawrence laugh hysterically. Look who's the belle of the ball tonight.

Chapter 41

Chris as Amanda

"So I told Lawrence to really give Jonny a taste of his own medicine." The girls and Lawrence are all hanging on my every word.

"And I haven't texted him in three hours. I've gotten at least fifteen messages asking where I am and I just ignore them all," He pulls out his phone as evidence. "I've never felt more empowered."

"Since when did you get so good at relationships? I thought your only serious boyfriend was my brother. The college sweethearts." She rolls her eyes in mock disgust for the last part.

I am the only serious boyfriend Amanda has ever had. She was really kind of young when we got together. "I watch a lot of Dr. Margaux. You'd be surprised what you can learn about relationships when you watch daytime television." I give Roxy a knowing smile.

Charlie walks over and joins us. He pulls a chair up by Roxy. "So, Amanda," he says, "you gonna tell your friend here that she should go out with me?"

"I would never tell her that, Charlie." I mean it, too. Charlie is a good friend, but he is not the type to settle down and I like Roxy.

"What do you mean?" He feigns outrage. "I'm a great guy and a very good catch. I'm smart, I have a good job..."

I see Roxy roll her eyes. He keeps going, "I come from a great family and I'm a Browns fan. What more could a girl ask for?"

"You're right, Charlie." My sarcasm is lost on him, but not on the rest of the group.

"If you want to date me, then why do you talk to your friend's wife and not to me, heh? I am perfectly capable of determining if you would be someone I would date."

"A strong woman, I like that." He leans towards Roxy. "Well, will you go out with me sometime?"

Roxy gives him a studying gaze. And then turns to the group and says, "Not on your life, buster."

We all start laughing, even Charlie. "Why? What's wrong with me?"

"Well, how should I say this, you seem a little, arrogant?"

"Fair assessment." *The guy is his own worst enemy.*

"And cocky."

"Yeah, I'm pretty cocky, too."

"And..."

Charlie interrupts her. "Okay, I get the picture, but I guarantee that by the end of the night, you'll agree to a date. I'm making it my mission."

"Uh. Oh. Roxy, sounds like you're in trouble." I say through a mouth full of mimosa and cheese fries.

"We'll see." This whole exchange has left me impressed with Charlie. Roxy is playing it cool, but her body language has changed. Her mouth has softened and she's leaning in. She's interested in him.

The game starts in about a half an hour and the bar is in full swing. Pre-game karaoke is always a big deal at Ruby's and tonight is no exception. I'm just finishing my tenth mimosa (who knew these things were so tasty) when I hear my name being called.

"I need Chris and Amanda," the DJ says. "Chris and Amanda, you're up. *Saw You In My Dream.*"

I'm in shock. Who put our names on the card? It's one of our favorite songs, a classic duet, written and sung by two of our favorite old time, country singers, Adam Dodger and Chelsea Flew. I look over at Amanda and see my mouth turn up in a grin. Looks like it was all her idea. *Well,* I think. I love karaoke and I'm quite good at it, so this could be fun for me, but Amanda hates karaoke, she can't sing at all. Even the kids grab their ears when she tries to sing a lullaby. But she asked for it, so it's on. I grab her hand and we head to the stage. "Are you sure you want to do this? It's not too late to back out."

"Oh, I'm sure," she says with a smile. "I can't wait." The music begins and we grab the mics and start swaying, she's up first, singing the Adam Dodger part.

"Darlin', when I first saw you my life was a mess,
You had on those black boots and that pretty red dress,
And when we locked eyes,
I was surprised,
You wanted to dance with me, and be with me."

I've always been a great singer and I love karaoke. My body is swaying in time to the music and I'm feeling a little buzz. I don't usually get to sing Chelsea Flew's part. Soon, I'll get my chance when I join in for the second verse. I see my cue on the monitor and sing:

"And it's something strange, that I can't explain."

Hold on. Something is terribly wrong. I sound like a fog horn. Oh shit, Amanda can't sing and I'm Amanda. When I say Amanda can't sing, I mean her voice could torture prisoners. I once saw her clear out a whole bar in college with a particularly horrific version of a popular R&B song. This is no exaggeration. I didn't think her voice would sound so horrible if I was the one in charge of it, holy shit was I wrong.

Here I am in a room full of people stuck with her dreadful singing voice. I look at her and she's all smiles. It was sabotage. Well, I think I'll just have to make the best of it. I continue singing and I start to work the room. I walk up to an overweight biker dude, hop on his lap, and caterwaul, *"And it feels so real, yes it feels so real, my thoughts have left on this train,"* directly in his ear. The crowd loves it. I give the biker a quick kiss on his cheek, hop off his lap and head toward our table. *"Can't tell if I'm asleep or awake, and I don't want to know,"* I bellow at Lawrence. He sinks

back in mock disgust, but Roxy starts dancing. The crowd gets even more excited. I look at the stage and see Amanda encouraging the room to sing along with us. Everyone joins in:

"Cause when I saw you in my dream
You were meant for me and it felt so right
And it lasted all night
And when you saw me in your dream
We danced all night and it was so right
And it lasted all night
It lasted all night."

This goes on for the whole song. Everyone is having a great time. At the very end Amanda and I are back up on stage together. We're facing each other and singing along with the crowd while we look directly in each other's faces,

"And when I wake up next to you, and you wake up next to me, and there's nothing in between, and you say I saw you in my dream, yes, I saw you in my dream."

The bar erupts in wild applause, but I barely hear it. I'm in another world. The only person I see is Amanda. I grab her and kiss her hard on the mouth. I don't think I've ever loved her, or her atrocious singing voice, quite as much as I do in this moment.

Chapter 42

Amanda as Chris

We get back to the table and Charlie and Bobby are cracking up. "That was classic, man," Bobby says. "She's so terrible, it's great."

"Yeah," I say. "I thought it would be fun. Did you have fun, Amanda?"

"I had a blast." Chris ends the mimosas and grabs a beer. He's getting really drunk. I'm kind of shocked by how sober I am. I guess it is true. Men metabolize their alcohol more quickly than women.

"The game is about to start." Charlie's face is like an excited kid on Christmas morning. "You ready to get your ass handed to you, Claridge?"

"Whatever Charlie. Did you like striking out with my neighbor? She wasn't too impressed with your moves, now was she?"

"She will be very impressed with my moves later, bro. I promise you that I will hit that ass."

Just then, Roxy comes up. She's overheard. "No one, hits this ass, it's much too pretty for hitting." She uses a withering smile to punctuate her remark. "I need Amanda to go to the bathroom with me. I need to talk to her, you know, girl stuff."

Chris gets up, "Sure, Rox, let me grab my bag." I feel a pang of jealousy, not only is Chris getting to hang out with my best friend, but he also gets to use the ladies' room.

They leave for the bathroom. Charlie pulls his chair in closer to mine. "You know, Claridge, I really do think your neighbor is kind of cool. Do you have any advice?"

Charlie is kind of an ass, so I'm not sure if I'm going to try to help him or torpedo him. What the hell? Roxy and I have talked about how cool it would be to find her a guy who would be friends with Chris so we could all go out together. It may be nice if they dated. "She's got a kid. He's the key."

"What?"

"Her son, Joaquin. If you win him over, she'll like you."

"And if I don't win him over?"

"Then, you're done."

"Okay. Got it. I need the kid to like me. I can do that. But, how do I get to the point where I get to meet the kid? She's tough. I'm used to it being easier to get a girl."

"The girls you go after are easy, Roxy isn't. She's a quality girl, not a vapid bimbo."

"Are you saying I usually date vapid bimbos?" he asks indignantly.

I don't even answer I just gives him a look that says, "Are you kidding me?"

"Okay," he acquiesces, "So, how do I get a quality girl?"

"You treat her with respect," I say. "Drop all the bravado and the cool guy bullshit and let her see who you really are. She'll either like you or she won't."

"Okay. Thanks, Claridge."

"No problem, bro." I think I may finally be getting the hang of talking to the guys.

Amanda and Roxy get back from the bathroom and the Steelers win the coin toss, they opt to receive. The kickoff is returned for a touchdown. Charlie turns to me expecting me to gloat, but I

can't right now because I am making out with my husband, right there in the middle of the bar, in front of our friends and family.

I look at Chris and say, "The Steeler's just scored a touchdown."

"I don't care. I want to score."

"Then let's get out of here."

I go to the bar and pay the tab. He grabs our stuff. On our way out of the bar something catches my eye. It's dark and I'm more than a bit little drunk, but I swear that Roxy is sitting with Charlie in the corner watching the game. I know it's probably nothing, but she's not the type of girl who willingly watches football. Maybe she likes him? I warned her he was a player, but apparently, I'm not the only who wants to have a good time tonight.

Chapter 43

Chris as Amanda

On our way home we can barely keep our hands off each other. The whole time we're walking together, we take breaks to kiss and grope each other. At one point, I push my body up against a neighbor's garage and grab my own ass. It's awkward to touch myself like this, but the beer has lowered my inhibition. Besides, it may seem bizarre, but even though we've swapped bodies, I can feel Amanda's energy in my body. I feel like I'm the husband and she's the wife, we're just wearing very realistic costumes.

Our neighbor, Mr. Fealy, comes out of his house to yell. "Get away from my garage, you kids!" His face registers surprise when he sees it's us. We both laugh at his reaction and run further down the street to get away. Mr. Fealy yelled at us like we were teenagers. Laughing together like that just turns me on more. I know I need to go to my mom's house and get the girls, but I push the

thought from my head because all I want right now is to be with my wife.

We stop on the front porch to make out and tug at each other's clothes. I struggle to pull the keys out of my purse while Amanda is kissing my neck and my ears and my mouth. Her mouth is all over me, finding a sensitive spot, teasing the flesh, and then moving on to the next. It makes unlocking the door extremely hard to do..

I finally get the door open and we head into the house dropping clothes and shoes as we go. Amanda and I haven't been this hot for each other since we were first married. I thought those days were behind us, but thank God, we still got it.

I'm glad I took the time to masturbate earlier today. If I wouldn't have done this, I may have been distracted by how my new female body is reacting to the stimulation. It's not as intense as it was when I was in my own body. Don't get me wrong, I'm definitely turned on, but it's been a slower burn.

When I was myself, I'd pretty much get at least a partial erection at the slightest provocation. It was always physically impossible to deny my stimulation, but Amanda's body is different. It's a subtle wetness and gentle throbbing between my legs that lets me know I'm aroused. Even thought it's subtle, it's still powerful. I can barely contain the urge to rub against his legs the way an animal would. I want to be out of this dress so our skin can connect. The craving is almost more than I can handle.

I can feel that Amanda is hard. The material around her crotch is pulled taut and when I reach down and grab my penis she lets out a satisfied moan. I've done this more times than I can count for as long as I can remember. I've never been ashamed of touching my penis and I've spent countless hours learning how to give myself pleasure. All that knowledge will be useful tonight.

We're not going to make it upstairs. I pull Amanda into the family room and rip at her underwear and pants. She pushes them down and they hit the floor. I see my naked body with my erect penis, ready to go. *Atta boy*.

At the same time, she's grabbing at the fabric on the side of the dress. This appears to be the spot where it is secured. The dress looks good, but it's kind of hard to get off. She abandons the idea of taking it off and just pushes up the skirt of the dress around my waist and I wiggle out of the panties. All the spandex makes it difficult, but I finally manage to pry them off.

When we're finally ready, it's a bit awkward, because I'm always on top when we have sex and I'm used to thrusting my penis into her. We have to slow down our pace to adjust for the differences. She lays back and I get on top of her.

We laugh between kisses while I try to make it fit. Finally, it's in and I start to gently rock on top of her. It feels good, but not the same as it did when I was in my own body. I, however, have learned a trick or two. I put my hand down and gently stroke my clitoris. Ahhhh...that's better.

Chapter 44

Chris as Amanda

No wonder he likes sex so much. This is great. His penis is full of nerves and it doesn't seem to matter how I move it. There is always friction in the exact right spot. In fact, it feels so good that I'm having a hard time stopping myself from having an orgasm. This is a nice change. I'm usually so worried about the kids coming into the room that I don't even relax enough to come. I have to achieve a trance-like level of focus to enjoy sex in my body. The sensations of sex in his body are impossible to ignore. This time I'm sure I'll climax. I want to have an orgasm, but not yet. I look up and see my body on top of me. I resist the urge to be critical. I'm shocked at how much I'm enjoying this. Clearly, Chris has done some homework because it's been a long time since I looked that happy during sex.

I decide I want to be on top. I wrap my arms around his waist and flip over on top of him. That's better. I can control the penis

better from this angle. Hopefully, I'll be able to hold off on the orgasm for a little longer. I do, but not for very long.

When it hits me, I lose all sense of time and space. I feel like a pleasure bomb has erupted inside of my body. It takes all the strength I have to stop myself from collapsing. It's unbelievable how good this feels. I barely notice Chris, but as usual, he seems to have found a way to take care of his own needs.

After it's over, we lay on the living room floor. We're both breathing heavily from the exertion. I'm still a little aroused, but also quite sleepy. I snuggle in against the side of my body and close my eyes.

"Hey, Amanda, don't go to sleep. You need to go pick up the kids. Emma has school tomorrow."

Crap. I forgot about that. Chris is always the one who has to get the kids. This is a definite drawback. "Can't I just close my eyes for a second?"

"I wish you could, baby, but it's getting late."

"What time is it?" I move to look at the clock.

"Holy shit," Chris says with a little laugh. "It's only nine o'clock. We're old."

"And lame," I chime in smiling with satisfaction.

I stand up and grab my shirt from the floor.

"What happened to my arms?"

"Huh?" I'm distracted by the sex. "What do you mean?"

"Hold your arm up," he commands.

I do as he says, I look under the arm and see the problem. "I... um... just got a little carried away with the clippers?" I offer meekly. "Sorry."

He laughs. "I hope you're the one who has to stay in that body until the hair grows out. That is going to itch like crazy."

"Speaking of staying in each other's bodies. What we've been doing to switch back hasn't been working."

"Yeah."

"Any ideas?"

"Not really. I guess we just keep trying. We'll do it again tonight when we put the girls to bed."

"And if it doesn't work?"

"To be honest, I have no clue what to do. It's not like we can do a web search. Do you have a plan?"

"Nope. I guess we just keep trying to wish back. If it comes to it, and we're stuck for good in each other's bodies, well, then, we'll just have to deal with it."

"That's a scary thought, but not as scary as Mady if she doesn't get to bed early enough."

"Yeah, you should probably head over and get the girls now. Your mom has had them for a really long time and even though it's early by adult standards, it's still late for little kids."

"The game isn't even at half time yet. My mom won't expect us until the start of the second half."

"Well, what should we do until then? Watch the game?"

His face is snuggling into the side of my neck. "I have a better idea. We can try to make that baby you've been wanting." He drops light kisses on my neck as he talks.

"So, you think you can handle being pregnant?"

"Well, maybe we should just practice." He grabs me and pulls me on top of him. I feel my penis getting hard again. I can't believe it's ready to go again. It just got soft. I'm starting to have a new respect for this thing.

Chapter 45

Chris as Amanda

She just left to pick up the kids. We made it to the bed for the second go around and I'm snuggled under the sheets, completely naked. Just the way I like it. It took a while, but we managed to get the dress off this time. That was the best sex I've ever had. When I came the second time, it felt like it would never end. And Amanda was still going strong. I've read about multiple orgasms, but to get to experience it like that…what a gift.

I know I have to get cleaned up before the kids get home. I'm sure Mady will be in my room later tonight and I don't want her to find me naked again. No wonder Amanda is always wearing clothes. It's censorship by toddler.

I take a quick shower, careful to keep my hair dry this time. I don't want a repeat of this morning. When I'm done I pull on a tee-shirt and underwear and head downstairs to get a glass of water. Out of habit I grab my cell phone and I'm thankful that I

have because there are new text messages from Jenna. My heart stops for a minute.

I don't want to look at them, but I know I have to. I grab the phone and touch the envelope icon.

Stopped by ur office. Bad boy, skipping hours.

The second one came in an hour later, *Been thinking about u a lot 2day. When can I see u again?*

And finally, just twenty minutes ago, she wrote, *"I'm sorry about ur wife. I know u are mad. I miss you. L"*

Shit. I guess my email letting her down easy and committing to my marriage didn't work. I'm going to have to do something more. I decide to put her off for now. Maybe tonight Amanda and I will be able to finally switch back. I text her, *Swamped tomorrow. Wednesday, okay?*

I get an answer immediately. She was waiting for me to text her back, not a good sign. *What time?*

Afternoon. Don't contact me until then. Won't talk until I see you face to face.

OK. Love you.

She's never said she loves me (well, she told me when she thought I was Amanda, but that doesn't count). She's getting really brazen. I delete the messages from my phone. Amanda cannot see these.

I don't want to tell Amanda about Jenna, but if I can't figure out a way to get back into my body by Wednesday afternoon, I'm not going to have a choice.

Chapter 46

Amanda as Chris

When I get back Chris is in the kitchen on his cell phone.

"Put my phone down," I say playfully. He jumps. I set the baby carrier on the floor, walk up to him and wrap my arms around his waist. "You have better things to do." I kiss him hard on the mouth.

"Ew," Emma says. "Don't kiss Mommy."

She comes over to us and wraps her arms around our legs. Mady is close behind and she does the same thing. "Yeah, don't kiss Mommy," she says.

I reach down and grab Emma. Chris picks up Mady and we pull them into our hug. They smile and laugh at this big family embrace.

"We're missing Sammi," Emma says. She wiggles away from me and rushes towards the baby carrier. "I'll get her."

"No, Sammi is sleeping. Leave her alone. You two need to get upstairs and brush your teeth."

"Okay." Emma's tiny face crumples a little in the defeat. "Can we do night-night with both of you again? It's been fun with both of you."

"Yeah, I'll be in. Now, go brush your teeth."

I've had such a great night tonight. I know I should wish us back, but I'm afraid we'll lose our magic if that happens. I don't want things to go back to the way they were. I know I won't be wishing to switch back tonight. I want one more night of the fantasy.

Chapter 47

Chris as Amanda

Before I even open my eyes, I say, "Hi, Mads."

"Hi, other mommy." She's stroking my hair. It's creepy, but relaxing, too.

"I wish you wouldn't call me that. I'm your mommy." Forced to lie again.

"I won't say it in front of the others. I can keep your secret."

"Whatever you say, Mads." While I'm concerned she knows more than she should, I'm also impressed at how intuitive she is. "Wanna cuddle?" I throw the blanket back and expose a nice spot next to me.

She crawls in and goes to sleep. I'm really ready to switch back to my old body, but when I do, I know I'm going to miss this.

Chapter 48

Amanda as Chris

I woke up early to find Mady asleep next to my body. It reminded me of how much I miss being myself. Tonight, I'm going to give it my all and really wish to switch back. It may not work, but I need to try. I've been frightened to do it because I thought it would ruin what Chris and I have rebuilt. After last night, I think we've turned a corner in our relationship. We still have a lot to talk about, but we're on the right path.

I gently shake Chris awake. "Want to have coffee before the baby gets up?"

"Oh." He starts to move. "I'd rather have sex."

"Coffee first?"

"Sure, I guess so."

"Meet you in the kitchen in five?"

"Yeah. Okay." He's sitting up now.

I go downstairs and turn on the coffee maker. I hit the button and feel compelled to do a little spin of celebration. *I want to celebrate coffee? Who is this person?*

It's been so long since I've been this happy that the relief is readily apparent. Every breath feels easier and in spite of the fact that I'm considerably larger than usual, I feel a lightness I never even realized was missing. I haven't experienced this type of happiness since Chris and I were young. It's different because we have the kids, but the general vibe is the same.

He comes into the kitchen and grabs a coffee. We sit down at the table.

"Good morning. How'd you sleep?"

"Good. Does Mady come into our room every night?" He lets a yawn escape.

"Oh, yeah." I nod my head. "I forgot to warn you about that. She likes to come in and watch me sleep. I usually take her back to her bed, but I see you've overruled your own rule."

"I'm too tired. It's just easier this way."

"I know." I smile.

"Of course, you do. I'm sorry. I shouldn't be making rules about the kids that make your life harder. If I've learned anything from switching lives, it's that what you do is really hard and I should be trying to make it easier."

"It's okay. I know you didn't want them in our bed because that's supposed to be our time alone together. If I made more of an effort to be close to you all the time, it wouldn't be as threatening to have Mady sleep with us at night."

He closes his eyes and takes a deep cleansing breath. "Why couldn't we talk like this before? It feels so easy now."

"We didn't really understand each other before. We do now. I get you and you get me. Your job is fun. I'm not surprised you like to do it and it's also a lot of work. You do much more than teach a few classes. I was shocked when I was looking at all your email."

"I have it easy. What you do here, with the girls...and my mom...and the house. Just look at the house. I've let them trash it. I can't stop them. They're better at this than I am."

He's right. The house is trashed. There are dishes everywhere but in the cupboard and the floors are covered in toys.

I laugh. "Yeah, it looks pretty bad. We'll catch up with it later. For now, I'm just happy and I don't want to be distracted by any-

thing." Just then, the monitor's speaker comes to life announcing the soft whimpers that will soon be followed by a louder cry. Sammi is awake. "Well, almost anything."

"I'll get her." Chris starts to get up.

"No, let me." I put the mug down and stand. "I miss her and I have to get dressed and go to work soon. I'd like to hold her for a few minutes, if that's okay."

"Sure," he says smiling. "I've been thinking about having another baby and I want you to know that I'm on board. I finally see why it's so appealing to you. They are so cool to hang around with. I'd love to have another one. Boy. Girl. It doesn't matter."

"Of course, you feel that way now." I smile at the irony. "When I was in bed last night, I was thinking about how great it is to be alone with you. I don't feel like I have to have another baby anymore. In fact, I'm kind of anxious for them to leave so we can spend more time alone together. I love the kids we have and I feel like that's enough. Besides, if we don't switch back, I'm not sure you could handle being pregnant and giving birth."

"Shit. I didn't think about that." His eyes widen and his mouth drops open. I just played the ultimate trump card. Men may tell their wives they'd have the babies, but there is not one alive who actually means it. "Nope. No more babies."

I go upstairs and get Sammi and her bottle and take her downstairs. We sit and snuggle. This is what I was meant to do and I don't regret it. I love my kids and even though it is hard, I'm a great mom. Chris can have his work, I'll take mine any day. I'm pretty sure a glowing teaching evaluation has nothing on early morning cuddles with an infant.

"Hey, babe," he says. "I can take her now so you can get a shower."

I hold her close for another second and then give her to Chris. "Tonight, we'll change back."

"I don't know, Amanda, I've really been trying and it hasn't been working. I've been thinking that maybe it wasn't the wish at all, maybe it was something else. I just don't have any idea what that could possibly be."

"If I tell you something, promise you won't get mad?"

"What?" He looks suspicious.

"Promise?"

"Okay, I promise. What did you do?"

"It's not what I've done. It's what I haven't done."

"Huh?"

"I've never made the wish." I cringe. He doesn't react, so I barrel on. "After that first day, I saw us getting closer and I didn't want it to end. I was afraid if it did, then things would be bad again. It's my fault."

"You did this?" He motions back and forth in the space between us. "I thought you couldn't wait to change back? Are you ready to do it now?"

"Yeah. I feel like we're at a better place than we've ever been in. I can't think of anything that would break us up. I love you so much and I want to be with you forever."

"Me too," he says coming over to sit on the couch with me. "Tonight we'll both make the wish and we'll change back and tomorrow we'll wake up and start the rest of our lives together, in our own bodies."

Chapter 49

Chris as Amanda

I can think of something that may break us up, but I'm relieved to know that she hasn't been making the wish because that means there is still a chance it can work. If she does it tonight, and we change back before tomorrow, then she'll never have to know about the whole ugly business with Jenna.

Sammi is contentedly looking at her toys, so I sit her in the play yard and go upstairs to get Mady and Emma out of bed. Amanda is getting ready for work. The girls and I gather around the table and I pour the cereal. Amanda comes downstairs and joins us.

"You know, it's not that hard to make an omelet," she whispers to me. "I can teach you tonight, if you want?"

"Why don't you focus on trying to get us back in the right bodies tonight," I whisper back, gently ribbing her. "If that works,

then we won't have to worry about adding to my cooking repertoire."

"Fair enough."

After breakfast, Amanda takes Emma to the bus stop. Before she leaves, she gives me a real kiss. The girls give their now-familiar chorus of "Eww."

"If we keep making out in front of the girls like this, they are going to need therapy."

"I'm happy to pay for that."

I go into the kitchen and unload the dishwasher. Mady follows me in, "When my real mommy comes back, can I have eggs again?"

"Sure," I decide to go along with it. "You can have whatever you want when your real mommy comes back."

"I want you to know, I'll miss you." My chest tightens. I love this kid. "You have been a good other mommy and I like that you let me sleep in your bed."

"I like it too, Mads." I mean it. "Now, go eat your cereal before it gets soggy." I'm choking back tears and I don't want her to see.

"Okay." She trots toward the table, but only makes it a few steps before she runs back and wraps her tiny arms around my legs. I pick her up and hold her close. I set her back down and she runs to the table to eat her cereal.

When she's gone, I think to myself that I can't believe I did something that could destroy my family. I feel so guilty that I made out with Jenna. I can't imagine how badly I would feel if I would have let it go further. I'm a complete idiot.

Even if we are finally able to switch back, I really should just tell Amanda and ask her to forgive me. We're strong enough now and we're listening to each other again, so I may be able to explain. There is no excuse and I can't justify it, but if she knew my reasons, maybe she could forgive me. If I try to keep my fling with Jenna a secret, it will eat me alive. I don't want to lie to Amanda anymore, instead I want us to be able to move forward from here with honesty.

I grab her phone and send her a text. I don't want to tell her while she's at work, so I ask her to leave early and meet me for lunch at the house. I'll put the girls in front of a movie and I'll level with her. Now that I've made the decision, I already feel much better. I know we can get through this. We have to.

Chapter 50

Amanda as Chris

I'm in a haze of happiness when I get to work. I feel like the whole world is brighter because of the lightness in my spirit. I walk into the building and I'm ready for my last day as Chris.

He set it up so his first class goes to the library for a demonstration on using the research databases. One of the librarians will do this. All I have to do is show up. The other class is taking a test and I just need to pass it out and collect it. His night class isn't until later and he's arranged for a guest speaker. So, all in all, I should be able to do this for one more day.

On my way here, I got a text from Chris asking me to come home early for lunch. I'm hoping Roxy is around so we can leave Mady and Sammi with her for one more quickie before we switch back.

I feel a twinge of guilt at the idea of leaving my kids again, but I know when things get back to normal, I'll be with them all

the time, so what's another hour or two? A few days ago, I would have never left them to be with Chris, but now I'm hungry to spend time alone with him.

Chris and I need to have a healthy relationship so we can keep the family together. While I still believe divorce is a valid option when a marriage isn't working, I see now that we can avoid it if we keep our relationship strong.

When I get to my office door, I see Jenna standing outside waiting for Chris. I've been trying to avoid her, but she's already seen me, so I'm not sure how I'm going to pull that off. I stop walking and think about going back down the hall to duck into the men's room. I can't believe the men's room is where I think to seek refuge. I've come a long way.

Before I can retreat Jenna sees me and smiles. My mind looks for alternatives to the conversation I'm about to have, but no alternative presents itself. I can feel myself begin to perspire a little, so I try to reassure myself. After all, how bad can it be? I go to Chris' office door and unlock it.

"Hi, Jenna," I try to sound cool and detached, like I'm in a hurry to do something more important.

"Hi, Chris. I know we weren't supposed to meet to pick up our discussion of grad school until tomorrow, but I couldn't wait."

"Um... okay." I try to cover for my lack of knowledge. *Chris must have been in touch with her. Why didn't I see those messages?* I have his phone and I've been checking email and social media with him. I walk in and she follows me. I sit down at the computer and hit the button to bring it to life. "I'm a little busy. I have class soon, so can we make this quick?"

She walks over to the door. Shuts it and locks it. What the hell is she doing? This isn't good. I'm alone with her. "No. I've been waiting too long for this to be quick."

She comes toward me, grabs my face, and kisses me hard on the mouth. I'm so in shock I can't even move. *Why is she kissing my husband?* I try move away from her, but she's on top, straddling me before I even have full consciousness of what is going on. Her hand snakes through the tight space between our bodies and ends up on Chris's penis. I feel the damn thing start to get hard. That's enough. I stand up and she drops to the floor.

"Would you quit doing that?" She looks up at me from her position on the floor. "It really hurts. I mean, last time I get that you were startled by the phone, but what is it now?"

Last time, what does she mean by last time? Chris has done this before? I'm flabbergasted. I can't think, but I need to pull myself together. This little bitch has information about my husband and I need to know it. I have a chance here to find out everything. "What do you mean, last time?"

"You know. Friday. When we were making out and Dr. Rupert called so we had to stop?" I will her to stop, but the poisonous words continue to tumble from her mouth. "I can't tell you how long I've waited for this, baby. I have been in love with you almost since I first met you. Every time we have class together, I think about what it would be like to kiss you and to touch you. On Friday, I thought for sure we were finally going to do it. I know your office isn't the best place, so I thought that after class we could go to that hotel on Vine Street. This is just the warm up." She's up off the floor and heading my way again. I dodge her and move to a different corner of the room. She stops moving and stands in the middle of the room, hand on her hips. "What's up with you?"

"I have to go." I unlock the door and practically run through it. I must get out of here. I have to get into the air so that I can breathe again. I hear her calling after me.

"Chris! Chris! You can't go. You have class. Chris, come back here!"

Chapter 51

Chris as Amanda

This morning has been a nightmare. Every time I start to do something, I'm interrupted by another request from Mady. *Get me juice. Turn on my show. Make Sammi stop crying*. It's frustrating. I'm pretty sure that Amanda doesn't sit at all during the day.

I look around our completely trashed house and know I need to do some cleaning. I haven't even been home alone with the kids much since the switch, but the house is already out of control. Mady is little, but she can wreck this house like there are five of her.

After about an hour, Roxy stops by. I'm so happy to see her I almost hurt myself running to the door to say hi.

"Roxy, you are a sight for sore eyes."

"Yes, I know." She enters the room and gives me a harsh look to acknowledge the mess of the house.

"Hi, Aunt Roxy," Mady says, running to give her a hug. "Are you here to see me?"

"Yes, Madison." She bends down and embraces my daughter in a warm hug. "I came to see you and your mother."

"I go watch Muffin Top Mountain. You watch my show with me?" she bats her eyes and smiles sweetly. "Please. Please. Little Please."

"In a minute, sweetheart. I need to talk to your mommy first, okay?"

She nods her head and goes into the family room.

Roxy turns to me. "So, tell me all about it. You and Christopher couldn't wait to leave the bar last night. I thought you were going to make love on the table in front of everyone."

She's right. We were all over each other. I smile. "It was the best sex ever, Rox. I don't think I've ever come so hard and I know I've never come so many times." She gives me a strange look. "What?"

"Nothing. You just usually don't talk like that. You know, with so much...uh...detail. It must have been great." She tries to brush off her dismay with a wide smile.

"It totally was."

"And..." She's digging for something, but I don't know what it is.

"And what? Oh, he came hard, too. I did this thing where..."

"No! No! No!" She cringes with every "no." "I don't need the details, Mandy. I want to know how you feel? Tell me about your feelings."

This happened yesterday during the makeover, too. How much time do women spend talking to other women about their feelings? I'm not even sure what to say, "My feelings are... good." *There.*

"Details, Mandy. You have to give me details so that we can figure out what to do next."

"I know what I'm doing next."

"Really?" She leans forward in anticipation of my answer. "What?"

"I am going to make a sandwich. Want one?"

"No! What are you going to do about Christopher?" She clears a small place for herself at the end of the messy table. "Are you going to stay with him?" I bring her coffee and head back into the kitchen to get to work on my sandwich.

"Oh, that." Last night was so wonderful I forgot she was thinking of leaving me. Well, that's over now. "Yes. Last night made it clear to me that I love him and we can make our family work. I am definitely staying with Chris."

"Oh, Mandy," she says getting up to hug me. "I am so happy that you feel that way. Now we can be married to best friends."

I stop spreading the mayonnaise and look up at her. "What do you mean?"

"I spent last night with Christopher's friend, Charles. I know it's early, but I think I love him. He is so handsome and so smart and so funny. He still thinks I dislike him. He has no idea yet, but I'm going to marry him. Let me tell you all about it."

Charlie. Oh boy, I can't wait to hear this. She has no idea what a player he is. I've known him for more than seven years and his longest relationship lasted only eight dates. I can't imagine him ever getting married, even to Roxy. I finish making my sandwich and settle in for another round of analyzing our feelings.

Chapter 52

Amanda as Chris

I make it to Chris's car in the parking lot before I completely lose control and start crying. It almost would have made sense if I would have found out about him and Jenna weeks ago, before the switch. I knew things were bad and that we were headed for a divorce. I may have even been relieved to have an excuse for walking out on him. It would have been more convenient if it was his fault, but in the last three days I've fallen in love with my husband again.

I think about him with Jenna and I cry harder. Chris and I have been together so long I don't even remember any of the other girls he was with before me. I mean, I know their names and I know some of their stories, but they just seem so...insignificant. And now, here's a new girl.

I thought we were past this stage. I believed he was over the playboy drama and committed to being with just me, even if we

were miserable together. How can I ever trust him again? And being in his body and knowing how his body works it makes me even crazier.

My mind betrays me by conjuring up an image of him kissing her. I try to will it away, but the replacement is worse, an image of them smashed against each other as he gets an erection comes into focus. I've only ever been attracted to guys, but when she was on top of me his penis responded to her. Since the switch, I've learned how easily he gets an erection. I'm sure he got one when he kissed her on Friday. It makes me want to cut the damn thing off.

He's probably gotten them by just thinking about her. He's probably masturbated thinking about her. *Oh, my God*. Maybe he's thought about her while we've had sex! Maybe he was thinking about her last night! It makes me sick. I open the car door and vomit on the pavement. I'm supposed to be the only one who arouses him.

I'm supposed to be enough for him, but of course, I'm not enough anymore, am I? It's not enough that I've had his kids and taken care of him and his house. Nope, he had to go out and find a little tramp. I know I shouldn't take it out on her. This is his fault, but I can't help it. I hate her.

How could he do this to me? Even as I think it, I know the answer. Things between us were bad. We weren't friends anymore and I was spending my days thinking of ways he was making me miserable and dreaming up ways to make him miserable, too. I know that I contributed to this problem, but even with this knowledge, I'm still not sure I can forgive him.

It's all because of that stupid wish which led to the stupid switch. If it wasn't for that, I wouldn't know about Jenna and my husband's betrayal. I thought it was a great thing a few hours ago. I thought it saved my marriage, but instead it's wrecked the whole thing. If we would have never gone through this, we could just go on living in misery. Now, I love him again and I know about his secret and I have to do something about it.

I don't know what my next move is. I can't go back in there, so I drive toward our house. I realize I'm leaving his work in the middle of the day and skipping his classes and meetings, but I don't really give a shit.

I get to our neighborhood and drive around the block. I'm not ready to go into my house. He's there and the girls are there and

I know when I go into the house my marriage is likely to be over. If I just keep driving, I can keep the illusion alive for a little while longer. Until I'm ready, I'm just going to keep the car moving.

Chapter 53

Chris as Amanda

I can't believe Roxy hooked up with Charlie. Lucky guy. Poor girl. He's a complete dog. I tried to tell her, but she wouldn't listen. She told me that I'm underestimating her and that she didn't appreciate me trying to come between them. I dropped it. Amanda should be back when the shit hits the fan. She can deal with Roxy's heartbreak.

I haven't made much progress cleaning, so I decide to boil some water for a delicious lunch of macaroni and cheese. The girls like this and so do I. But after this, I promise to eat only salad. It's only been three days, but I could barely squeeze into Amanda's jeans this morning. She's going to kill me when she gets back into her body.

Mady and I sit down at the table and I put Sammi in her high chair beside me. Poor kid. I don't think she's eaten anything ex-

cept dry Cheerios and baby cereal for days. I can't seem to get the hang of feeding her baby food. She spits it all back at me. Amanda has much more patience than I do.

I clean up the dishes with Mady's help, and after lunch, they go into the family room. Mady plays with dolls and Sammi sits in her exersaucer. It's almost time for Amanda to come home and I'm getting nervous about our talk.

I hear the front door open. I guess it's time to face the music. I go out and see my body standing there. It's Amanda and my face is a wreck. My eyes are red and puffy. Has she been crying?

"What's wrong?" I move quickly toward her to give her a hug. When I get there, she pushes me to the side. I hit the wall. "Why'd you do that?" I'm shocked by how easily she pushed me away.

"Jenna stopped by your office this morning."

My heart breaks in half. She spits words at me. "When she was there, she kissed you, and grabbed your dick, and said it wasn't the first time this has happened. Got anything to say?"

I have about a million things to say, but all the words are trapped by the giant lump in my throat. Instead, my eyes get wet and the tears pour out over my face. I swallow back the lump far enough to say, "I'm so sorry. I was going to tell you, but I was afraid you'd leave me."

"You lied."

"I did, but..." There is no excuse. I don't have an argument to make.

"But what, Chris?" I'm shocked by the anger I hear. "You go to work and have an affair with an undergrad. You've become the type of middle-aged loser we used to laugh at. You've gone too far, and now, I don't have any choice but to leave. You did this."

"I know, but don't leave. You do have a choice. We can talk about it and work it out. We were doing such a good job of talking this morning."

"This morning you were someone I knew. You're not that anymore."

"I am. I'm the same guy. I'm a better guy now that we switched bodies. I *was* going to sleep with Jenna, but that was before. It was stupid. I was stupid. That's all over now. I'm sorry I even thought about it. You're all I need. You're all I want. Please, forgive me."

"I can't do that, Chris. I've never felt worse in my life than I did standing in that office coming to the realization that you were

keeping this secret from me. That you and this...this...girl have been carrying on behind my back and laughing at my expense. You did something that made me feel little and unimportant—like a joke. I can't forgive that, Chris. If you would have fucked her and told me about it and begged for forgiveness, I could have understood." She pauses to consider this. "Maybe...I don't know. But you had a chance to come clean about this and you didn't, and now, I don't think I'll ever be able to trust you again."

Mady walks in and sees us crying. She runs to my body and hugs it. "Why you cryin', Daddy?" She asks the question as if she can hug the pain away. "Don't cry."

"You'll have to stay here with the kids," Amanda says through the tears. "I don't want to be around you, so I'm going to leave for now. I'll be back later tonight, after dinner, so we can try to switch back. I want out of your disgusting, cheating body, so it better work. I'll spend the night in the family room."

She bends down and gives Mady a kiss on the head. "It's okay. I'll be all right, baby. I love you."

She throws me one last glare before she walks out the door. Mady looks at me and her tears start to fall. I sit on the floor holding her and we both cry.

Chapter 54

Amanda as Chris

It's late afternoon and I don't have a thing to do except be pissed off at my husband. I sit in the car and plan what I'm going to do. I should have kicked him out of my house, but I wasn't thinking clearly. I need to do something to numb the pain.

I start the car and drive around again. I've been at it for about half an hour and I'm in a part of the city I usually don't visit. In front of me, a neon beer sign flashes like a beacon calling me home. I decide I need to get a drink with strangers.

I walk in and survey the joint. The lighting is dim and it could use a coat of paint. For some reason, this appeals to me today. I think I've found the perfect spot for day drinking away my problems.

"Hi." The bartender wipes the counter as I collapse onto a barstool. "What can I get for you?"

"An Appletini and a shot of tequila." My voice is defiant.

"Okay." Her welcoming smile turns to a knowing nod. "Coming right up."

I think back to the first day of the switch at Ruby's. I ordered girly drinks then, too. The memory makes me smile, just a little bit. Chris was so charming and funny and we really enjoyed being together. It was nice to feel like we were a team. I picture Jenna and the smile leaves my face. All of that is past. Chris is the enemy again.

"You look sad." The bartender is back with my drinks. I normally wouldn't share my problems with a complete stranger, but I desperately need to talk to somebody. I would give anything to tell Roxy what has happened, but that's not an option. I down the shot without even wincing and decide this nice lady bartender will have to do.

"It's been a rough day."

"Wanna tell me about it?"

"No, but I will." I guzzle the drink in seconds enjoying the burn of the alcohol. "I found out my husband is cheating on me with one of his students. He's a college professor."

"That's rough. How long have you fellas been married?"

Shit. I've accidentally made myself a gay man. Oh well, she doesn't know me, besides, what does it matter? It'll feel good to speak freely about Chris and not have to pretend that he's me.

"Ten years. We have three kids. It's really a mess."

"Yeah." She pauses for a moment, as if she's trying to decide what to say next. "I've been in your shoes. My husband cheated on me. I left him."

"That's what I'm thinking I need to do. Can I get another drink?" The alcohol is helping. I'm starting to feel better. I can still feel the tears threatening to escape, but the sensation is dulled. My swirling thoughts are calming, almost as if this whole nightmare is happening to someone else.

"Sure." She leaves and comes back with a second Appletini. "When did you find out?"

I look at my watch. "A few hours ago."

"Wow, that's recent. Did you talk to him?"

"Yeah. He said he's sorry and he wants to work on it. I don't buy it. He lied to me and I had no clue. I can't get past the fear that he'll do it again." I take a drink.

"I hear ya. But, you want a little free advice?"

What do I have to lose? I don't have anyone else right now and it feels good to get this off my chest. "Sure."

"If he wants to work on it, you may want to give it a try. I still regret that I just walked out on my marriage. Things were bad before the affair and I figured it couldn't be fixed. I was so hurt and angry, I just wanted to get away from him. After a few years of dating losers and trying to raise my daughter with my ex and his new wife, I wish I would have tried harder to keep it together."

I shake my head. "I don't feel like I'll have the stomach to hear what he has to say. I can barely look at him."

"I know how you feel. But when I look back I think even if working on the problem wouldn't have kept our marriage together, it would have gone a long way to making it so we could be civil again. I feel like I didn't do everything I could and I regret that. I still miss him. He was my best friend." She walks away and I finish my drink.

Maybe she's right. I would miss him if he were gone, but I'm not ready to let him off the hook. I need more time. I motion to the bartender and she gets me another drink. I got a while before I need to be home.

Chapter 55

Chris as Amanda

The rest of the day is excruciating. I want to talk to Amanda so badly that it makes my joints ache. I want to take the minivan and go find her, but I have kids to care for. I'm going through the motions. Singing songs, getting bottles, kissing ouchies, but my head is spinning. I just want to go and get a drink or talk to my sister or someone, but I'm still trapped in Amanda's body. I've never felt so alone in my life.

I make it through the afternoon and Emma comes home. After homework, she plays with Mady, which takes some of the focus off me. I have to take care of Sammi, but at least she can't talk. She can't keep asking me why I'm sad and where her daddy is.

I'm so eager for Amanda to come home I serve dinner (hot dogs and apple sauce with Ranch dressing) early. It doesn't help. She doesn't come home any quicker. I take Mady and Emma up-

stairs and give them a bath. Still no Amanda. She said she'd be back after dinner. I need to see her.

It's almost the girls' bedtime when I get a call. It's her. She's drunk. "Pick me up," she slurs into the phone.

"Where are you?"

"Where am I?" She yells over her shoulder. I hear a muffled response in the background. "Oh, okay," she replies to the stranger. "I'm at the Pickled Herring. It's on the east side."

"I know where it is. I'll load up the kids and be there in twenty minutes. Don't go anywhere, okay?"

"Where am I going to go?" It's not a joke. It's an accusation.

"I'll be there soon. I'm sorry. I love you."

She hangs up.

I go into the family room and load Sammi into her car seat. "Grab your jackets, girls. We have to pick up Daddy."

"Why?" Emma is playing and this disruption bothers her. "He can drive himself."

"Yeah, he can drive himself," repeats Mady.

"He's a little"—I stumble for the right word—"sick." Being drunk is kind of like being sick, right? Alcohol is a type of poison.

"Oh no!" Mady's eyes widen in genuine concern. "Daddy is sick. Is that why he cry earlier? Can you kiss him and make him better?"

"I'll try, Mads. I'll try."

We pull into the parking lot of the Pickled Herring. The place is a dive. I want to go in and see Amanda, but I can't leave the kids in the car at this place. I call my cell instead.

"We're out here." My pain has been relieved by the distraction of getting everyone into the car and finding this place. Hearing her voice breathes life back into it. "I have the girls with me. I told them that you were feeling sick."

"Ha! Yeah, I'm sick. Sick at the thought of seeing you." She hangs up.

I see my form at the front of the bar. "I'm going to help Daddy get in the van," I say to the girls. "I'll be right outside the van." I hop out and walk over to Amanda, she's stumbling. I put my arm around her waist to help steady her. She pushes backwards and stumbles.

"I got this. Don't touch me."

"Let me help you." I reach out, but pull my hands back when I see the hatred on her face.

"Isn't it kind of late for that, Chris?"

"I understand you want to punish me, but do you think you can hold off until we don't have an audience. You need to try to act normal until we get the girls to bed."

She straightens up and makes her way over to the van. She gets into the passenger seat and shuts the door. I take in a deep breath and release it in a whoosh. Now that she's in the van, I can quit picturing her in increasingly dangerous situations. She's being an absolute asshole, but any kind of communication is better than earlier when she wouldn't answer her phone and I didn't know where she was.

I drive us all home and get Amanda and the girls into the house. It's past the girls' bedtime, so we go directly to Emma and Mady's room. It's time for the night-night. The whole process is marred by Amanda's sloppiness, but we proceed anyway.

"What's first?" I ask Mady.

"Itsy Bitsy Spider, Daddy's way," says Emma. Great. Amanda gets up and sings a slurry solo of Itsy Bitsy Spider complete with drunken hand gestures. The kids laugh at the silliness. They just think it's their daddy acting goofy. They have no idea it's really their mommy inside their daddy's body acting like a drunken fool because she was at the bar all day trying to forget that their daddy, who is trapped inside their mommy's body, cheated. Life is too complicated.

"Okay, time for prayers and wishes."

We all recite, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, may angels watch me through the night, until I wake to morning's light. Amen." Next up is the biggie: wishes. Here we go. "Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight."

"Make a wish." It's Emma's sweet voice whispered in the darkness that makes me understand that the wish I make tonight is going to work.

We all pause to make our wishes. I close my eyes and think, I wish I were myself.

Chapter 56

Amanda as Chris

I wish I was back in my own fucking body and that my cheating husband was back in his dirty, filthy disgusting body. There.

I kiss the girls goodnight and leave the room. Chris still needs to take Sammi to the nursery, so I have a few minutes to get ready in our room before he comes back and I have to go to the family room. I go into our bedroom and take off my clothes. I pull on a pair of shorts and sit on the edge of the bed. The booze is starting to wear off and I'm getting sleepy. I lay my head on the pillow and before I even realize what has happened, I'm dead asleep.

It's the middle of the night. I feel a familiar sensation. I know she's there. She hasn't been in to see me in a few nights. She's been visiting Chris instead, but I recognize her presence. I open my eyes and see Mady looking at me.

"Hi, Mads," I say in my familiar voice. I want to jump out of bed and look in the mirror, but I know I can't freak her out. Instead, I smile at my daughter.

"It's you Mommy," she says.

"Of course it is, baby." It is me. I wonder if Chris knows yet. I look over at his spot in the bed. That's weird. I grab my glasses and look around. I'm on the twin bed in Sammi's room. It all comes rushing back into my head. Chris cheated on me. I got drunk. I passed out on our bed. He must have decided to sleep in here tonight. How did Mady find me?

"Will you take me to my bed?" she asks. I grab her hand and we walk into her room. I lay down beside her. It feels so good to be back in my own skin. All of Chris's aches are gone and I'm just left with my own.

I don't care how I got here. The universe is working the way it's supposed to and I'm just glad to be myself again. I snuggle into Mady and smell her hair. I missed this.

"Mommy?"

"Go to sleep, Mads."

"I will. I just have one question."

"Okay, what is it?"

"Does this mean other mommy is gone?"

"Huh?"

"Other mommy was nice. Is she gone?"

What did Chris tell her? "I'm not sure what you mean?"

"You were gone for a few days, weren't you, Mommy? When you were gone, we had other mommy and she was nice."

Mady knew? I'm not sure how to respond. "Other mommy is gone." I'm surprised by the sadness I feel in speaking this aloud. "I'm here, Mady. It's time to sleep."

"Okay." A yawn escapes her mouth. "I love you and I love other mommy, too."

"That's nice." Her innocent revelation reminds me I'm part of something bigger than my relationship with Chris.

I want to ask Chris about this, but I can't. I want to wake him up and show him that it worked, but I'm too angry.

Now that we've switched back, I can kick him out of the house and the girls and I can start over. Even as I think it, I remember what the bartender said to me. She was a complete stranger, but she's also the only person who knows what happened.

If I leave him, will I regret it later? I know the kids would be broken-hearted if we got a divorce. Maybe I owe it to all of us to talk to him, to hear him out, and try to stay together. The anger has slipped away and I'm left with a deep aching sadness.

Mady's asleep so I quietly leave the girls room and go over to where Chris is sleeping. Even though I kind of hate him right now, I'm looking forward to waking him up and showing him that the wish worked. I'm standing in the doorway when I hear his cell phone ring. It's on the nightstand, but instead of waking up and grabbing it, he pulls the pillow over his head and rolls onto his stomach. It looks like my drunken afternoon is giving him a hard time. Serves him right. I go over and look at the phone. It's Jackie. Why is she calling at one o'clock in the morning? I answer. "Hello."

"Amanda? Where is Chris?"

"He's sleeping. What's going on, Jackie?"

"It's Mom. Oh, Amanda, my mom had a stroke. I'm at the hospital. Chris needs to be here."

"Oh my God, Jackie. Is she okay?"

"I don't know yet. The doctors are working on her. I need Chris to get down here. Will you wake him up?"

"Yes. Of course."

I pause to look at him. Things were finally working out for us. I feel sad for him. I don't want to tell him about his mom on top of all the other stuff we've been through.

"Amanda, what's the problem?" It's Jackie's voice coming through the phone.

I take another second to look at his sleeping body. I know I have to wake him.

I lean down and touch his shoulder. "Chris, wake up." He groans and moves a bit and opens his eyes, but doesn't get up. He reaches weakly toward me and I place the phone in his hand. "Chris, you have to wake up. It's your sister. Your mom is in the hospital."

Chapter 57

Chris

I hear my phone in the distance and roll away from it. I feel like I got hit by a truck. I felt okay when I went to bed. I must be getting sick. The phone stops ringing, but now I hear voices. I pull the pillow more firmly around my head. I'm not ready to gain consciousness.

Someone is touching me. I open my eyes and look up at Amanda. My sweet, beautiful Amanda. The switch must have worked, because she is here right in front of my face. There's a lot of sadness in her eyes. I move my hand forward to reach out and touch her. She hands me my phone instead.

"Chris, you have to wake up. It's your sister, Your mom is in the hospital."

I'm not sure what to say. Amanda is right here in front of me. She's herself again and she doesn't even look mad, but I can't fo-

cus on her. I have to find out what is happening with Mom. I lock eyes with Amanda.

I grab the phone to talk to Jackie, but I keep my focus on Amanda, mentally willing her to forgive me. "What happened?"

"I don't know, Chris. I got a call from the hospital to come here. The doctors are with her now. They won't let me in and they won't tell me anything. I need you to come here."

"I'm on my way, Jacks. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

I hang up the phone and swing my legs over the side of the bed. My head is pulsating. Amanda got really drunk last night, and now, I have to pay for it.

My mind won't settle. Too much has happened in the last twelve hours. My wife found out about Jenna, I switched back into my body, and my mom is in the hospital. My life consists of nothing but a long line of catastrophes. I try to pull my focus back onto Amanda. I need her to help me right now. I feel like I'm sinking under the weight of my own choices and I want to be able to lean on my partner.

"Jackie wants me at the hospital right away. I know we need to talk, but my mom..." I let the words trail off as tears collect in my eyes.

Amanda looks at me with sympathy, but not kindness. "I'll make you some coffee," she says. "You can take a travel mug with you on your way to the hospital." She turns and walks out of the room.

I guess I'm going to have to deal with this alone. She didn't offer to go with me and I'm in no position to ask. My clothes feel comfortable and forgiving as I get dressed. I needed the reassurance of washing my face and looking in the mirror at my own reflection. I head downstairs. I grab the coffee and look at Amanda. She's so beautiful.

"Thanks," I say. I want to reach out and hug her and kiss her and go back to how things were yesterday at this time, but I know I can't do any of it. All of the understanding we gained during the switch evaporated when she found out I wasn't being honest with her. I take the coffee.

"Can I take your van? We left my car at the bar."

"Of course," she says. "I can manage without it until you get a chance to pick up your car."

"Thanks."

"And Chris," she says quietly.

"Yeah?"

"I hope your mom is okay."

"I know. I'm scared, Amanda."

"Just go to the hospital. You'll feel better after you talk to the doctors."

"Yeah. Can I call you?"

"Sure. Let me know how your mom is doing."

"I will." I want to talk to her about more, but the request is stuck in my throat. "Kiss the girls for me, okay?"

"Okay."

"I love you."

"I know." She leaves the kitchen and heads back upstairs. I go to the hospital.

Chapter 58

Amanda

I've just gotten Emma on the school bus when Chris calls. "How's your mom?"

"She's going to be all right. She's lost some of her motor function, but with therapy she has a good shot at a full recovery."

"Thank God. When can I bring the girls in to see her?"

"Maybe tonight. When you bring them, is it okay if I'm there?"

He wants to talk about our relationship. It's clear in the tone of his voice. I'm not sure I can do it right now.

"Yeah. I'll drop them off with you and you can bring them home after you're done." I know it's not what he had in mind, but I don't want to deal with our drama right now. He needs to take care of his mother and focus on her. "Chris. I'm sorry that the timing is so lousy, but is there any way you could stay somewhere else for a few days. I need some time to adjust to being back in my

body and to process all the stuff that's happened. I'm confused and I don't feel like now is a good time to talk about it."

"We have to talk about it, Amanda. I'm so sorry. I love you," he pleads.

"No. Not yet. I will want to talk to you. I have a lot of questions and I need answers, but I don't want to do it now."

"I understand." He sounds relieved that I'm not completely shutting the door. "Take your time. I'll be here when you're ready. Whenever you're ready. I love you, Amanda. I'll take whatever you can give me, whenever you can give it to me."

"Okay," I'm not sure how to respond to that. "Well, keep me posted about your mom. Bye, Chris."

"Bye."

I hang up and my body floods with relief when I dial Roxy's number. It feels good to be able to do this again. Finding out about Chris and Jenna has crushed me. All I've wanted to do is talk to my best friend. Now, I can see her again. She tells me to come over for coffee.

As soon as I see her, I start to cry.

"What's wrong? Why are you crying? You seemed so happy yesterday. Why are you crying now? Go into the kitchen and wait for me."

She ushers the kids through the house and sets them up in front of the television.

"Chris is cheating on me with one of his students," I say through my tears.

"Holy S-H-I-T, Christopher is sleeping with one of his students? That A-S-S-H-O-L-E."

"Well, he's not sleeping with her, but he's definitely cheating on me with her." Even as I say it, I'm not sure the distinction matters. "He kissed her and he's been confiding in her. He's been carrying on this emotional affair for, I don't know how long. And, as if that weren't enough to deal with, Linda had a stroke last night. She's in the hospital."

"Oh, my poor Mandy," she says. "Will Linda be all right?"

"Yeah, it looks like she'll be okay, but she's going to need a lot of rehab. It's all too much for me to process. I want to be able to help Chris, but I'm so hurt I can't bring myself to do it."

"This is terrible. You must be going crazy. How can I help you?"

"I don't think that you can. It's a mess."

"I thought everything was going to be okay," she says. "You and Christopher seemed to be having such a good time the other night. And yesterday, you told me you had the best sex of your life and were no longer thinking about getting a divorce."

Chris told her those things? It makes me proud and a little smug that he told Roxy we had best sex of his life. *Take that Jenna.* The thought is temporary because I realize, almost immediately, while he was confiding in my best friend about our sex life, I was getting pawed by Jenna.

The next batch of tears makes its way to my eyes and starts to escape. "We were having a great time. We had fun. We laughed and told stories. It reminded me of what drew us together to begin with. Then the next day, the very next day, this girl tells me she's in love with my husband."

"She's in love with him." Roxy is flabbergasted.

"That's what she said." I reach for a tissue and blow my nose. "She loves him." I hear myself wailing as I say it. I look over at the girls. They are still watching the cartoon. I'm frightened that we're going to scar poor Mady for the rest of her life with all our adult drama.

"That is terrible." Roxy puts her arm around my shoulder. "And the girl, this S-L-U-T is the one who told you. That is even worse. Christopher has betrayed you. But what are you going to do about it?"

"I was hoping maybe you could help me figure that out because I really just don't know what to do. I asked him to stay somewhere else for a few days and he agreed to, so that buys me some time. Which is good because I seriously don't know whether I'll ever be able to trust him again."

She takes a minute. "Here's what I think. You're right not to trust him, because he betrayed you. I just don't want you to act irrationally. It would be even worse if you did something without thinking about what it would mean in the long term."

"Okay," I say nodding my head in agreement.

"Are you sure you don't want to be married to Christopher anymore, or are you just hurt?" she asks. "Because if you are just hurt, then your feelings can be fixed. He can make you trust him again. He can make you fall in love with him again, but in order for that to happen, you have to stay in the marriage, you can't just stop trying."

"It doesn't feel like I'll ever be able to trust him again."

"I'm not saying that you will, but I just want you to think about it before you make a decision based on the pain he has caused you. Believe it or not, the feelings you have now will change with time. They could turn into bitterness and resentment or you could get over them and use this as a way to make your marriage stronger."

"Right now, I vote for bitterness and resentment. But, I trust you, Roxy. I'll think about it."

"Ah, Mandy. It'll be okay. I'll be here to help you with whatever you need, no matter what you decide."

I bury my head in her shoulder and continue to cry.

Chapter 59

Chris

I finally make it back to campus on Thursday. I've canceled my classes for today, but I had a lot of explaining to do for just walking away from work on Tuesday. My first stop is Sally's office. I knock on the door and she invites me in.

We talk about my early departure and settle the details of my personal leave. I'm taking off the rest of this week, too. After it's all worked out, I get to the real reason I'm here.

"This isn't easy, Sally," I start off. I can't look her in the eye. I respect her too much and I'm deeply embarrassed about my behavior.

"What is it?"

"I... I..." I am trying to get my mouth to form the words, but my brain is screaming at me to keep quiet. I may be able to get away with what I've done, but I decided I don't want to. I screwed

up and now I'm going to come clean. I don't want Jenna to be able to hold this over my head.

"I've been having an inappropriate relationship with one of my students."

"What does that mean?" Sally looks alarmed and confused.

I decide to stop beating around the bush and just say it. "I kissed Jenna Clarke in my office last Friday. I have also called her late at night, sent her inappropriate messages, taken her to lunch. Oh, and, I touched her boob and she touched my penis." There. Full disclosure.

Sally looks like she's going to fall off her chair.

"Well," I prod her. "What do I do?"

"Give me a minute," she says. "I'm having a hard time accepting that you did this."

"I know. This was a huge mistake, but I'm ready to take responsibility. If you have to fire me, I understand."

"I'm pretty sure it won't come to that, but I have a few questions first. How old is Jenna?"

"Twenty-one."

"Okay, good. Did you ever promise her, in any way, that if she did these...these..."—she's searching for the right word—"activities with you she'd get a better grade on an assignment or in the class?"

"No, in fact, I have it in writing that our flirtations will have no impact on her scores. Besides, I only acted inappropriately this semester and she's only auditing my course. She is not an official student in any of my classes and I won't be evaluating her. No grades for audits."

"Okay, good."

"Did you force yourself on her or use your position of power coerce her into a physical relationship?"

"Absolutely not. She pursued me. I also have messages that prove this. It was definitely mutual, but I didn't ask for it or make her do anything."

"Well then, so long as what you've told me checks out, I'll have to put a letter in your personnel file indicating we had this conversation. If she makes an official complaint then the union will get involved and there will be a hearing. You need to keep your proof that you didn't do anything illegal, and while it is certainly undesirable, it should be okay. I'll check this all out with the university's attorney to make sure."

"Okay. I'll do whatever you want."

"Also, if I were you, I wouldn't run for chair this time. If Jenna went public, it could be embarrassing for the department."

I'm relieved. "Go ahead and remove my name from consideration. I think I need to spend some time getting my life back together. It will be a relief to have less responsibility at work."

"That sounds good, Chris. You know, you could have tried to get away with it. Jenna might have kept quiet."

"I hope she will," I say. "But I don't want to live with this. I want to acknowledge it, take responsibility for it, and move on. I think it's about time I grow up."

"Okay," she says, getting up. "How's your mom?"

"She's doing better," I say. "I have a quick meeting and then I'm going to go back to the hospital and sit with her."

"I hope it's okay."

"Me, too."

"I know this isn't a good time for you, but I wanted to let you know that your advice worked."

"Huh?"

"About Oliver. I told him to go ahead and move out and he proposed that same night. I'm engaged."

"Oh, Sally, that's great news." I have no idea how I played a part in this. It must have been Amanda. Just thinking about her helping Sally makes my eyes moisten.

"Yeah. You were great that day. I really needed someone to listen and you knew exactly what to do."

"I really was great then, wasn't I?" Of course, I'm not thinking of myself. I'm thinking of my wife.

I get up, say good-bye, and leave. I tell the department secretary I'll be using personal days for the rest of this week. I rarely miss work, so I have a lot saved up. Now, there is one other thing that I have to take care of before I leave campus. I get out my phone and I call Jenna. I ask her to meet me in an hour at the Big Steamin' Cup, a coffee house that is located just off campus.

I'm sitting at the table drinking a large vanilla iced coffee when she gets there. I ask her what she wants to drink. She orders a latte. She looks good. She's wearing a short navy blue skirt and a red crew neck sweater. It's the same type of outfit she always wears when she sees me and wants me to be attracted to her, but seeing her doesn't have the same effect on me that it used to. I

don't really find her attractive at all anymore. I've seen her ugly side and I realize she's just an immature girl.

"I thought you were mad at me." She grabs my hand. "I didn't know that your mom was sick." I pull away.

"Yeah, she had a stroke."

"You poor baby." She moves her chair closer to mine. "I couldn't believe it when you just ran out of the building like that. I thought you had lost your mind." I fudged a little on the timeline of my mom's sickness to cover for Tuesday. I don't think there is anything in my contract about missing work because you switch bodies with your spouse and she has to leave because she meets a student you are screwing around with.

"Jenna..." I say moving my chair away from hers again.

She interrupts me. "No, listen, I have to get some things off my chest. First, I'm sorry I talked to your wife. I know that crossed a line. I didn't give you a chance to tell her about us and let her know what's been going on. That wasn't fair. I was angry because she was there with you. It felt like you were cheating on me and I overreacted."

Cheating on her? With my wife? The mother of my children? This girl is straight up delusional. I try again, "Jenna..."

"Please, let me finish."

I sit back and give a resigned nod.

"I'm sorry I came on so strong. I got the feeling I was going to lose you, like I had to do something right away or it was going to be the end of our relationship."

Her face looks genuinely apologetic, but also happy and excited. I feel bad that I'm going to put an immediate end to her happiness.

"Jenna, it *is* the end. You have lost me—if you ever really had me to lose. This was a mistake."

"I won't lose you, and our relationship was not a mistake. How dare you call it that?"

"It's too late. We can't do this." I look her in the eye to make sure she's getting my point.

"What do you mean we can't do this?" she counters. "Of course, we can do this. We can do whatever we want. We're both adults, Chris."

"Being twenty-one doesn't make you an adult. You're still young. You have your whole life in front of you. I'm married and

I have three kids. I love my family. You don't want to be with me. You want to be with someone who can give you all the time and attention you deserve."

"Well, you didn't act like you loved your family when you were sticking your tongue down my throat."

Wow, she can turn on a dime. "I shouldn't have done that, Jenna. I crossed a line and I'm sorry."

"You bet you crossed the line and I'm going to tell your boss."

"I already did that, earlier this morning. I told Dr. Rupert everything."

"Well, then, you're going to get fired." She sits back and crosses her arms defiantly. She looks like a spoiled little girl throwing a tantrum because someone denied her a toy she likes.

"Jenna, if you want to push this you can. It'll be very embarrassing for me, but I'm not going to get fired. Dr. Rupert and I already took the appropriate action."

She looks unconvinced, so I go on. "Because you were only auditing my class this semester, there is no official evaluation or grades. I won't have any further involvement with your education and there will be a letter in my personnel file. If you try to say I pushed this on you or tried to trade a better grade for sexual favors, I'll pull out the emails and texts I've been keeping for just this occasion. They make it clear that you pursued me and I made sure to put it in writing that grades wouldn't factor into any of it. If these emails become public, they will make you look bad, too. Really, Jenna, it's time to just let it go."

"Well, now, somebody was thinking ahead, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, I guess I was. I guess I always knew that this could blow up in my face and I wanted to be prepared for that. I should have stopped things before they got out of hand, but I didn't, and now, I'll suffer the consequences. I need to go back to my wife and try to fix my marriage. I hope that you can find a way to be happy. I'm really sorry about all this."

"You should be sorry," she says. "I love you, Chris. If you let me, I'll be good to you and your kids." She looks so young and sad. She's a victim in this, too. I should have never let it get this far. I've hurt a lot of people.

"Jenna, I know you're great and that's what got me into trouble in the first place. You shouldn't waste your time on me. I'm sorry."

She's still upset when she leaves, but I know I've done the right thing. Even if Amanda won't take me back, I don't want to be with Jenna. If Amanda won't take me back, I'm not sure I want to be with anyone ever again.

Chapter 60

Amanda

It's been three days since Linda had her stroke. I took the girls over to see her last night. She's still not doing great, but the doctors are optimistic. It'll be a lot of rehab and doctors appointments. I get sad when I think about my mother-in-law. I do genuinely care about her. I've been with her and Chris through many health issues and they are my family.

My information about Linda has been coming from Jackie. It's too painful for me to talk to Chris. Jackie's not sure why this is happening, but she's too distracted by her mom's health to ask a lot of questions about my marriage. Jackie has also become a lot more involved with her mom now that I'm not in the position to step in. She's going to take off a couple of days a week to help Linda with rehab. They are closer than ever.

It's hard to be on the outside of the family. I'm so used to being right in the middle, stepping up, and helping with every-

thing. Last night was the first time I've seen Linda since the stroke. Chris has taken Emma and Mady for the other visits. Chris and I haven't communicated about anything other than logistics. I've been able to keep our problems from the girls because they know that Daddy is at the hospital with Grandma. They haven't figured out anything beyond that, but I'm afraid that Mady saw too much and that she's starting to suspect that something is wrong.

This is an impossible situation. It's hard not knowing where our lives are going to go. I didn't expect to miss him this much. It's the little things that I miss the most. The other day, I caught a whiff of the shirt he wore when he raked the yard a few weeks ago. It smelled like Chris. Not like how he smells after a shower with all the body wash and cologne, but like the real Chris. I also found myself missing the little things he would always leave behind like bread crumbs or hair in the sink. These things annoyed me when we were together, but now their absence reminds me that he's not here and it's heartbreaking. I don't know that I want to be without him and I don't know if I can be with him.

I have moments of complete sadness mixed with extreme anger. Sleep never comes easily, no matter how tired I feel. I have hardly eaten since I found out. At least it's been easy to get rid of the extra calories he put into my body. I think I may have even lost a pound. I'm absolutely miserable.

I'm downstairs with the girls looking at a book when my cell phone rings. It's Chris. I've been ignoring most of his calls, but this time I answer.

"How's your mom?" I try to keep our conversation focused on this.

"Same," he says. "I'm at the hospital now."

"Oh, do you want me to bring the girls over and drop them off with you? Linda may want to see them."

"No. I was actually hoping I could come over to the house and talk to you. I know you probably want more time, but...well, I feel like I'm dying, I miss you so much."

I hear the strain in his voice. He sounds like a broken man. Even though he's responsible for this, I feel badly for him. I'm not sure if I'm ready to talk about what has happened, but I'm not sure I'll ever be ready. I decide to go for it.

"You can come over."

"When?"

"Right now?"

"Yeah, okay," he says.

"I'll call Roxy and ask if she can watch the girls."

"Thanks for doing this, Amanda."

"I'll see you in a few minutes, Chris."

I call Roxy and she agrees to watch the girls. I take them across the street. When I walk back over, I try to figure out how I want this to go. There are a million questions I need to have answered. I need to yell and to hurt him with my words. It's going to be an ugly conversation and probably an ugly few months, but something is becoming clear. I don't think I want our marriage to end. I think I may want try to stay married to my lying, cheating husband.

Chapter 61

Chris

Amanda finally answered one of my calls. Not having her by my side right now cripples me. My mom is sick and I need to lean on Amanda more than ever, but I've pushed her away. The last time my mom was sick Amanda handled everything. This time, Jackie and I have to make all the arrangements ourselves. I don't think I fully appreciated all Amanda did to take care of me. I've come to realize I've spent years taking her for granted.

I've thought several times about just showing up at the house and forcing her to talk to me, but after what I've done, I don't think I have the right to do this. I've talked to her every single day since we've been together. This new lack of contact it depleting me. I am an empty shell.

When she agrees to talk to me, I realize I've gotten what I wanted, but what she has to say may be something I don't want to

hear. What if she asks me for a divorce? This was in her head even before she found out about Jenna and now she has the perfect reason to ask me to leave. I shudder when I think about ending our marriage.

She may do this, but for now, there is nothing I can do except talk to her. She has all the power.

I turn into the driveway and park my car in the familiar spot under the maple tree. The tree was much smaller when we first moved in here. Amanda and I were so excited to be able to buy our own house. It really made us feel like a family. Like we made it. We finally owned our own small piece of the world.

It's cold outside as I walk up to the front door and ring the bell. It's ridiculous that I'm ringing the bell at my own house. I'm the one who bought it. It's my name on the mortgage, but I'm just a visitor now. I've lost my right to call it home. She's the one who makes it home.

I see her approach the door. She's just wearing jeans and a T-shirt, but these simple clothes look amazing on her. There is something about my wife—she can pull off the mommy look like no one else.

She gets to the door and looks at me. Her face is sad, not angry (I guess that's a good sign).

"Hi, Chris," she says. "Come on in."

I step into my home. She's got everything back in order. All the spilled food and drinks have been wiped away. The toys are all back in the bins. It looks good.

"Do you want a drink?" she asks. "I'm having wine."

"I'd love a drink."

I go into the family room while she is in the kitchen. We're acting so formal. Like I'm company from out of town and she's the hostess. Soon, Amanda is back with two glasses of pinot noir. She hands one to me and takes a seat on the opposite side of the room.

"So," she says.

"So."

"What do we do?"

"I want to come back. I love you." I lean forward in my seat, pushing my body in her direction.

"I'm not sure I'm ready for that. Besides, what does she have to say about you coming back?"

"Huh? I don't understand, who's she?"

"Don't be stupid, Chris."

I'm not trying to be stupid, but I just look at her, not registering her meaning.

"Jenna?" She says the name with disgust, rolling her eyes and shaking her head.

"She doesn't say anything. I haven't even talked to her since Thursday."

"Wow, a whole day. Sounds final."

I realize Amanda doesn't know my version of the story or anything that has happened since we switched back. "Let's back up a minute. Jenna is out of my life. The day after you kicked me out, I went to Sally, and I told her everything. I told her I kissed Jenna. I told Sally that I took Jenna to lunch and talked to her late at night. I confessed everything. There's now a letter in my personnel file to prove it."

Amanda looks shocked by the news. "First, I'm feeling blindsided by the fact that you took Jenna out and that you were calling her late at night. I didn't know these things."

There is a lot she doesn't know and I'm terrified to tell her. But if I want my relationship to work, then I have to come clean. "I'm sorry. I'll tell you everything. Anything."

"Just like you told Sally everything?"

"Yes. I just want the whole thing to be over. I don't want anything hanging over my head. I want to move forward."

"What did Sally say?" Clearly, Amanda's curious.

"She said as long as I no longer have direct contact with Jenna, we'll put the letter in my file and that should be the end of it. I also told Sally to take my name off the ballot for chair. I'm not interested in running anymore."

"So, you're not running for chair?"

"Nope. It's done. I'm actually relieved about it. With our marriage in the dumpster and my mom getting sick again, I can't imagine adding all the pressure of being chair. I need to be home more. I need to help more with my mom and I'd like to be home more for you. Jenna is now completely out of my life." I say this again to drive home my main point.

"Did you talk to her about this?"

"I did."

"What happened? What did she say? I need details. If you ever want me to trust you again, I need to know everything." There's desperation in her voice as she says this.

"Okay," I say feeling hopeful. She just said there's a chance she may trust me again, I take this at face value and dive in even deeper. "I met Jenna off campus, I bought her a coffee and I told her that I was in love with you and our family and I didn't want to see her again. I told her Sally knew about the kiss and other inappropriate communication. I told her that I have a letter in my file and I told her I'm done with her."

"What did she say?"

"She was upset, really upset. She threatened to have me fired, but I told her I had documentation that she wanted this...relationship." Amanda winces when I use this word, but I keep going, determined to get my side of the story out.

"What documentation?"

"I have some emails and stuff."

"Can I see them?"

"You don't want to do that."

"Don't tell me what I want, Chris," she says angrily. "I am capable of determining for myself what I want."

"You're right. I'm sorry. You can see anything you want. I'll show you everything I have."

"Did Jenna say anything else?"

I try to be honest with her. I give her a blow-by-blow description of the conversation I had with Jenna at the coffee shop. I then take it a step further and tell her about the confrontation I had with Jenna that was meant for Amanda, the night of the test review. It's hard for me to admit what I've done and I can see Amanda is bothered and hurt by every detail. Each time her chest rises and falls, each blink of her eye holding back her tears is a visible reminder of the damage I've done to her. She gets especially upset when I tell her Jenna has told me she loves me.

I've covered everything I can think of. "Amanda, it's over with Jenna. I'm sorry I ever let it happen. She's out of my life and I want to fix our marriage. I made a huge mistake and I can't change that. All I know is I want to be with you more than ever. You're the only person I think about. You're the only thought my mind will accept."

She blinks rapidly twice, again, then once more. Her mouth is a tight line of annoyance. I feel better getting all of this information out there, but I'm not sure how much more of this I can take. I can't continually be forced to justify myself to her. Either

she's going to try to get through this with me and we can move forward, or maybe it is over. I don't want to accept this as the final outcome, but I'm too tired and too upset about my mom to live in this type of purgatory anymore.

I look at Amanda and ask, "So, what are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking I don't trust you."

I'm gutted. The air in my chest escapes too quickly and my body refuses to replenish its supply.

"But, I want to try to. I want to try to fix it. I was ready to go. I was ready to get a divorce, but this whole crazy body swap made me fall in love with you all over again. I *may* regret it if I trust you and you hurt me again, but I *know* I'll regret it if I let go of the love of my life without even trying."

For the first time in days I feel some of the stress fall away. We're not there yet, but this is the break I've been hoping for.

Chapter 62

Amanda

After I say the words, I know I mean them. I can't just walk away from our relationship. I'm in love with him. When you're young, you believe relationships are based on hard and fast rules. If my boyfriend, fiancé, husband cheats on me, then I will never forgive him. After you're grown, and you have built a family around this core relationship, you know it's not that easy to walk away.

"I'll do anything you need me to do, Amanda. Seriously. I'll look for a new job and we can move anywhere you want. We can start over. Just tell me what you need and I'll do it."

"You have to tell me everything."

"I have been. I'll continue to. Just tell me what you want to know."

"First, I need to know if you ever fucked her. Before you answer this, just know, if you lie now and I ever find out that you lied, we're done. Forever." I say it with finality and I mean it.

"I never had sex with her. I was going to. I had made up my mind that I wanted to sleep with her. She came to my office to talk about school things. She'd done this before, but we never took it any further than flirting. She'd suggested a few times that she was open to a relationship and I asked her questions about this, it's all in the emails you want to see, but it always remained hypothetical. On Friday, we were alone in my office and I kissed her."

"How far did things go?" I brace for this. I'm relieved to hear it reiterated that they didn't have sex, but I know a lot can happen without it really being sex. I've run a million different scenarios through my sleep-deprived mind. I don't think anything short of a three-way with a donkey could top the ideas I've been concocting.

As he talks, I can tell he's becoming increasingly uncomfortable. "We kissed and I touched her boob. She grabbed my penis." His entire bald head is red with the warmth of his embarrassment and he can't look at me when he says the last part. I can tell he's ashamed. There's a childlike quality to him. He's remorseful and embarrassed of himself. *Good*.

"Give me details," I say. "I need you to tell me everything. You need to make sure that I know it all so I never feel blindsided by this again. I'm going to ask you questions and I want you to be honest."

"I will do anything, but I'm kind of afraid to tell you the truth because I don't want to hurt you anymore. Are you sure you want to know *everything*?"

"I've thought a lot about it and it's the only way I'll be able to move forward. I can't walk around knowing she knows something I don't. It was too painful to think that you had this secret from me you shared with her. It made me feel like I was being replaced. I need to know everything about this and any other secrets you may be keeping. If you want me to trust you again, we need to have complete honesty."

He goes through the whole story from the beginning. He tells me that he met her in class and he said things about me that weren't very nice. This is hurtful and even though he admits it was wrong, I know I'll have a hard time letting it go. He tells me

about their conversations and lunch dates. It sounds like he loved the attention. I almost let myself take some of the blame. I know I haven't been an adoring partner, but I stop myself. Maybe later, I'll take some responsibility, but for now, I don't want to confuse the matter.

He tells me about the day in his office they almost had sex. It's been a week, but it feels like another lifetime. I ask him questions about all the tiny details. What was she wearing? What time did it happen? What were you doing before it happened? What did you say to me the first time you talked to me after it happened? Each answer brings with it a sense of relief. I need to dig until I've unearthed every tiny piece of this story. My skills as a reporter are useful as I interrogate my husband.

We talk like this for more than an hour. It's exhausting, but something else is happening. Something strange. During the conversation, I feel myself become aroused. It's almost like my body is betraying my mind.

I know I should stay away from him. He's a dirty, filthy, cheating bastard, but I feel a pull to reconnect with him physically. I want to show him how mind-blowing sex with me is, so he never takes it for granted again. I want to mark him as my territory and reclaim my rightful position as his partner.

I moved over to the couch earlier so I could be closer to him while I ran my questioning. Now, I'm starting to feel turned on by the closeness. He smells incredible and he looks sexy. He hasn't shaved in a few days and it gives him a darker, harder look. I think of Jenna kissing his lips and the urge is no longer controllable. I lean in and kiss him. He's mine and I'm his.

Chapter 63

Chris

Holy shit. She just kissed me. And she's into it. Her mouth is soft at first, but it hardens and as she pushes it against my face in urgency. I can barely breathe, I'm so turned on. She moves her mouth to my neck and works her way to my earlobe. This is one of the most sensitive parts of my body and I moan as she gently bites the soft skin. The moan must have reminded her about my mouth because soon her lips have landed back on mine.

I try to keep up with her. It's hard to do because she's being so aggressive, much more so than usual. She flips her body around and straddles me. The insides of her thighs are pressed tightly against the outside of mine. Her breasts are in my face for a second. She smells delicious. Like bubble bath and cookies.

My hands run up the length of her back under her shirt, she lets out a small groan. I'm about to pull her shirt off, but before

I get the chance, her mouth is on mine again. She's kissing me deeply and I'm losing myself in the moment, but I'm a little scared that this some kind of cruel test. Am I supposed to have sex with her, or am I supposed to stop?

"Are you sure you want to do this?" I say, my breath coming in ragged bursts.

She pushes her hands against my chest for leverage and her body pushes away from mine. Her face is hard as she looks in my eyes and says, "Why? Don't you want me? Am I not good enough?"

"No, I want you," I grab her face and pull it on to mine. "I just wanted to make sure you knew what you were doing."

"I know exactly what I'm doing."

I kiss her hard and I put my hand under her T-shirt. It lands on her right breast and I cup it firmly as I continue to kiss her. My other hand is fumbling at her shirt. She breaks away and pulls the tee-shirt over her head. This is the opportunity I've been waiting for. My mouth finds her neck and then her breasts. I kiss the soft skin between her full breasts and then I move my mouth over and gently kiss her nipple. She lets out a soft moan of satisfaction.

Her hand moves down my chest and lands on my hard, throbbing penis. I've been hard since the first kiss. "Yes," I pant, my mouth tight against her skin.

I put my arms around her back and flip her onto the couch. My body is hovering over her. I feel the sweat and heat emanating from our bodies. She grabs the back of my neck and pulls my face back onto hers. There's urgency in the kiss. Her mouth tastes sweet and salty and I don't want to break away from this connection.

My penis is throbbing in my pants. I'm going to explode. I push my body into a standing position so I can wiggle free of my jeans and underwear. This brings some relief. She doesn't miss the opportunity. She's sitting on the edge of the couch and her hand is rubbing my penis. She stands and pushes against my chest. I fall onto the couch in a sitting position.

I barely have time to register the move before she's on her knees in front of me leaning in to kiss me. Her hand is on my hard penis, stroking it firmly. Her mouth moves from my lips and finds my neck, then my chest, and before I know it I feel her mouth on my dick.

Oh my God, a blow job. She hasn't done this in years. I try to remain calm, but the novelty of it is accelerating the process. Her mouth is warm and wet. She uses her hand to put pressure on the base while her mouth bobs up and down on the shaft.

"Yes," I groan in delight. "Yes, Amanda, Oh God, Yes." I know I won't be able to hold back unless she stops soon. I can't let myself come without making sure she gets off. It's too late. I can't hold it back. I feel the relief of the orgasm.

I look down at her and she looks pleased with herself. She should be. That was, without a doubt, the best blow job I've ever had. I tell her this. She smiles triumphantly.

I pull her up onto me and I hold her tight. "I love you. I love you. I love you." I just keep saying it with my head pushed up against her shoulder. My nose buried in her strawberry scented hair.

She's not done. She kisses me. I kiss her back. She stands in front of me and pulls off the rest of her clothes. I can feel my penis start to harden. I wasn't sure I'd be able to keep going, but it looks like my little friend knows just how important the stakes are right now.

"Let's go upstairs," she says taking my hand.

"Whatever you want." It's like I'm under her spell. She has complete control of our relationship right now and it's turning us both on.

We barely make it to the bedroom and she's on top of me. She's forceful and sure-handed as she positions our bodies. I want to make her feel good. I want her to know that she's my top priority, so I use my strength and push her off me.

Her eyes glaze with anger and it looks like she's going to protest, but I bury my head between her legs before she gets the chance to object. I use all my new knowledge of her body to guide my tongue to the right places. I work like my life depends on it—my marriage definitely depends on it. I know I've done my job when I feel her thighs tighten around my neck and her body shudders uncontrollably.

I'm not about to let it end there. I free myself from her thighs and take my position on top of her. I guide my penis inside. She hasn't even had a chance to completely recover from the first orgasm when I feel her body tense again. After that, it doesn't take me long to join her.

Chapter 64

Amanda

Nothing has ever felt more right than having sex with my husband. After the most intense sex of my life, I melt into his arms, and we just lay there kissing and fondling each other for a long time. When we break apart, I know there is still a lot to talk about. "We have a lot of work to do, don't we?"

"I have a lot of work to do."

"It's not all you, Chris. If there was one thing being in your body showed me, it's that I'm part of the reason this happened."

"You're not. I made the choice, I take full responsibility."

"Yes, I know you need to do that and you need to be clear about it, but if we're going to be honest, I've been pushing you away for years," I say. "I was even thinking about leaving you. This marriage was broken before you laid a hand on Jenna."

"How do you think it got this bad?" he asks.

"Let's see...too much responsibility...not enough time to be with each other. For sure, not enough sex and when we did it, it was mediocre. I let it get to the point when I pretty much was annoyed by every move you made. I should have talked to you when I felt this way and asked you for help, but I didn't, I kept it all inside and it made me resent you."

"I knew you were annoyed with me, but instead of making it safe for you to talk to me, I always jumped right in for a fight. I couldn't help myself. Even when I knew you were trying to avoid an ugly argument, I couldn't let it go until we were screaming at each other. I've taught classes on communication for years, but when it came to doing it at home, I failed miserably."

"We both failed. I was looking for a reason to divorce you and you were planning to fuck that little whore." I know rationally she's not a whore, but I have to say it. I want to say it. "I just still can't believe that you were going to fuck her." I feel the anger well up inside me again.

"Look, Amanda, I know I'm wrong and I am willing to do whatever it takes to win back your trust, but you have to promise me something."

I'm not sure I like this, but I have to hear him out. "What?"

"I'll do all the work and be honest and transparent and tell you whatever you need to know, but you have to promise me, at some point, we'll put this behind us. I can't live the rest of my life apologizing and being the bad guy. There has to be an end to the punishment, somewhere down the road, after I've shown you that you can trust me."

I consider this. "I think I can do that." We talk more about our future. I keep alternating between anger and sadness. He keeps answering my questions and taking responsibility. I'm not close to being able to forgive him just yet, but I'm starting to see the roadmap to how it will be possible. It's getting late and neither of us are sure what we do next. "Should I get dressed and go back to my mom's house?"

"I think you can stay here," I say. "We'll go over and get your stuff tomorrow."

"I love you," he says beaming. I hope I'm not making a mistake by letting him back in too early, but if we're going to make our marriage work, we need to be together.

"I love you, too. Now, who's going to go over to Roxy's and get three little girls?"

"I'd love to. I've missed being here with the four of you," I say.

"Play your cards right and you'll never have to miss us again."

"God, that sounds just perfect." He snuggles into me and kisses my shoulder.

Epilogue

Chris

It's the one-year anniversary of the wish. Amanda and I are starting to find happiness again. The last twelve months have been excruciating at times. After the night she decided I could move back in, she kicked me out again the next day. I ended up staying at my mom's house for another week.

There were days I felt like we were too far gone for me to fix what I'd done. It was on those days that I held on to the feelings I'd rediscovered during the switch. I couldn't help but feel that if we could get back to the happiness we felt during those three magic days, then we could build a future together.

It took a long time, but I feel like she trusts me again and I know I'm worthy of her trust. There was a lot of counseling, hers... mine...ours, but I don't think I've ever felt better about the future of our relationship. We've been going on regular date nights and

I'm working less and spending more time with the kids. It was hard to get used to this, but now I can't imagine it any other way.

Amanda has re-launched her career by doing freelance work for magazines. She's really great at it, and it gives her flexibility to be there for Emma, Mady, and Sammi. When she's working on an article, I step up and take on more responsibility. I give her the time she needs to be alone and write. It seems to be working for us.

The most incredible lesson from the swap was that we have to take more time to be the people we were when we fell in love. We'd lost them. I was looking to replace Amanda because I thought I'd lost her, when in reality she was still there. It was just difficult for her to find her way out of the responsibilities that she took on to make our family work.

She was acting like a bitch because she let the bitterness build up and she didn't know how else to get me to pay attention to her. I don't make that mistake anymore. At the first sign of trouble, I get a babysitter, take her out, and make her laugh. I've found that if I'm fun to be around, then she's able to let her guard down and open up to me.

My mom is doing better. She still has some problems, but the damage from the stroke is starting to dissipate. She and Jackie are closer than ever, which is great because Amanda doesn't have as much time to help Mom now that she's writing again. Don't get me wrong. Mom and Amanda are getting along better now, but they have a healthier relationship because Jackie and I are more involved.

Work is going really great, too. Turns out, choosing not to run for chair was the best thing for me and for Charlie. When he found out I wasn't going to run, he decided to do it and he won. Roxy is relishing the idea of being first lady of our department. I told her it doesn't work that way, but she has her own plans.

Charlie is a great chair and now that Sally is free from the responsibilities, we're working on research together. I was getting so mired in trying to be more successful I forgot how much fun my job can be. I research and I teach. This keeps my schedule flexible and I have even managed to work from home on most Fridays.

Amanda and I just attended Sally and Oliver's wedding. Amanda told me she butted in and gave Sally advice. I still think

it was that advice that made Sally so helpful when I told her about Jenna.

Next up is Charlie and Roxy's wedding. I still can't believe the old dog is going to tie the knot, but Roxy is exactly the type of girl Charlie needs. She's strong and independent and she makes him act like an adult. Besides, I've seen him with Joaquin and the three of them are magic together (it just hurts a little to see Joaquin walking around in a Cleveland Browns jersey. I feel bad that the poor kid will never know what it's like to root for a championship team).

I saw Jenna with her family at graduation. It's the only time I've talked to her since the day at the Big Steamin' Cup. I'm still embarrassed I let our relationship get out of control and I miss her a little. She's a good person and I'm sure she'll have a great life. Charlie told me she was accepted to a top-notch graduate program and I'm happy for her. The best part about seeing her at graduation was the way Amanda reacted to the news. It was one of the first signs that things really were good between us. When I told Amanda I saw Jenna, she didn't even freak out. She thanked me for trusting her to know this and asked me what happened. I told her everything.

Now that things are better I've been thinking about having another baby. I took parental leave with the others and I'd like a chance to do it again with my new appreciation for fatherhood. I'd have six weeks at home with the baby and Amanda. I'm not sure I'll be able to convince her, but I think it may be nice to have one more.

Amanda

Chris and I are finally at a good place. It wasn't easy to get here. There are days when I still feel guilty for letting him back into our lives. It's not because of anything he's done. He's been an open book since the switch. It's just because I feel like other people may think I'm foolish for allowing him to come back. I can live with the idea that others may find me foolish, so long as my daughter's don't. When I look at the three of them with their dad, I know it was worth the risk.

It took a while. There were many days when I thought I was over it, only to have a fresh wave of hurt or anger cause me to lash

out at him. He was remarkable. He didn't ask me to get over it. Instead, he'd call our counselor and set up an emergency session. He's taken full responsibility for his mistake, and it may seem strange, but I feel like we may be at a better place now than we were before the switch and his affair.

I decided we don't need to try to have another baby. Of course, now Chris is hinting around about it. Talking about parental leave and stuff like that. I, however, am happy with the family we have.

Also, I'm working part-time, freelancing magazine articles. Doing this lets me be a journalist again, but I can stop anytime I want to be with the kids. When I first started, I banged out about five articles in a month. I was just so hungry to get back, but then I took three months off to celebrate the Christmas holiday and spend time with the girls. Now, I write one or two articles a month. The extra income helps take the pressure off of Chris.

I just had a pitch accepted to a major national bridal magazine. I'm writing about the challenges of being maid of honor in a multicultural wedding. I don't usually write a lot of first person narratives, but seeing as how being Roxy's maid of honor is so interesting, I thought I'd share the experience. Roxy and Charlie are getting married in a month. The article focuses on trying to include and be sensitive to all the traditions of a Mexican (Roxy), American (Roxy and Charlie), African-American (Charlie) and Korean (Charlie's grandmother, who knew?) wedding. To say it's complicated would be an understatement, but Roxy is happy and nothing else seems important.

Linda is doing well. She gets together with Jackie and her kids and Chris and the girls at least once a month, without me and Bobby. They just hang out, but it's good for everyone.

Tonight, Chris and I are going to make the wish again, just to see if it will work. I wasn't on board at first, but Chris talked me into it. I find his curiosity sexy. Besides, I think we'd both like a do over on some of the things we did in each other's bodies. We've had a long time to think about different things we'd like to try.

So, the plan for tonight is to go through the routine and we'll see if it works. I'm still not 100 percent sure what took place the first time. I don't know if the body switch really happened because of the wish or because some higher power knew Chris and I needed a drastic intervention in our marriage. I'm not sure I care because it doesn't matter.

I don't think making a wish to switch is going to work tonight, but if I've learned anything it's that I don't have all the answers and turning things over to the universe can take you to places you didn't even realize you needed to be.

About the Author

M.B. Earnheardt is the author of *Switch-A-Wish* (to be released in Fall 2015) and the journalism program director at Youngstown State University in Ohio.

She has published stories for academic and news publications, but *Switch-A-Wish* is her first work of fiction.

M.B. grew up on a farm in Mahaffey, Pennsylvania. She earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Political Science, a Bachelor of Science Degree in Communication and a Master of Science Degree in Communication from Clarion University of Pennsylvania. Her Ph.D. is from Kent State University.

M.B. teaches media law, news reporting, imaging and design and advises the student newspaper at Youngstown State. She resides in Youngstown with her husband, Adam, and four children, Ella, Katie, Sadie, and Ozzie.

Chris and Amanda Claridge are *that* couple. They look happy. They live in a well-kept home, have three little girls and fit squarely into the traditional roles of husband and wife.

Chris is a handsome college professor, and easily charms most everyone he meets. He loves his job and can't wait to go to work each day. Amanda is a dedicated mother and caretaker. She tends to the kids and appreciates how important her job is, even if others don't get it.

Underneath the surface of this functioning family, things are unraveling.

Marital problems are about to split them apart when something magical happens. Chris and Amanda make a bedtime wish that forces them to live life as the other person. Chris must pretend to be his wife as he takes on childcare and household chores. Amanda steps out of her heels and into Chris' shoes to tackle his job as a college professor.

The role reversal is a revelation for the couple. Neither one has it as good, or bad, as they expected.

Can Chris and Amanda make it past the secrets they have kept from each other? Will this new perspective give Chris and Amanda the chance to find their way back to love?

When she's not writing, M.B. Earnheardt teaches journalism courses at Youngstown State University, preparing the next generation of great story-tellers. When she's not teaching, she helps her husband raise their four lab experiments (i.e., kids) in the Petri dish they call home.

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